# THE DILEMMA OF EXISTENCE IN THE NUCLEAR AGE: FOUR VIEWS

An abstract of a Thesis by
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The problem. The United States' use of the atom bomb in 1945 marks the beginning of a definite trend in American literature. Since that time, many writers have dealt with the questions of man's purpose and position in the universe and the existence and nature of God.

Procedure. The introduction of the thesis traces earlier dealings with the basic issue while the body includes analyses of four post-World War II American novels: Wise Blood, by Flannery O'Connor; Lie Down in Darkness, by William Styron; The Sirens of Titan, by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.; and The Martyred, by Richard Kim.

Findings. The novels approach the problem from various positions: theism, existentialism, black humor, and humanism. They deal with six common themes: war, God, human relationships, love, truth, and personal sacrifice.

Conclusions. The central message of each of the four novels is optimisitc. Although circumstances lead man near despair, he can find meaning in life.

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## Chapter 1

### The Dilemma of Existence in the Nuclear Age: Four Views

The meaning of human existence is a question that has permeated literature for centuries. As man contemplates the universe, he is faced with several unanswered questions concerning his position in the overall scheme of things. He desires a better understanding of his own purpose as an individual and the purpose of the existence of mankind, indeed, if such purpose exists. He desires to know if life is the sum total of that which he can see or if there is something beyond or outside of the human life span. In a real sense, this desire is the basis of literature, for the writer as spokesman for mankind has striven for an adequate explanation of the problem for philosophical as well as artistic reasons. For, as he confronts the problem, he seeks to understand it first of all on the personal level to allay the insecurity and doubt that fill the void left by not knowing. As an artist his heightened sensitivities afford a greater opportunity than is available to the non-artist regarding both understanding and explanation of such a basic and important question. His transcription of his findings in a piece of literature not only provides pleasure for the reader as a work of art but also gives insights into the complexities of man's existence in the universe. In this way the writer is instrumental in

the shaping of ideas and concepts. However, his works are not the only such shapers, for man is influenced by the totality of his experience and environment. He deeply desires to know what life is and how to live it. Toward this end he has conditioned himself through the societal process of establishing codes and mores for desired behavior on this earth often times accompanying it with the expectancy of an even higher level of existence beyond the grave.

Religion has, of course, been the chief embodiment of such a concept, especially the Puritan movement which has influenced our thinking for the past three hundred years. Man has often accepted this system wholeheartedly, for in it he finds a balm against much that he encounters daily in his existence on this planet. His accomplishments have infused him with a spirit of nobility; for, he feels, if he can circumnavigate his globe and more recently, leave it to travel to another one, and encompass so many of its aspects in his mind, surely he must be superior to it by nature. This belief has been a stabilizing force for centuries and has held up best under sparse investigation and challenge. However, as man moves into a more technological, intellectual age, his whole basis for acceptance of this position begins to erode. For he comes to live more and more in a scientific world based on logic and reasoning. Beliefs that have stood practically unquestioned for centuries are suddenly challenged on intellectual grounds much in the same manner as any

scientific idea is challenged in an attempt at proof or disproof. Science also tends to diminish the romantic conception of man's inherent nobility as it sees him in a detached sense as just another element of the cosmos. This scientific breakthrough of the past century has done much to challenge man's beliefs. The result has been devastating for many as they feel the ground of their entire concept of life with all its ramifications being destroyed. What is left is a rather empty feeling of fear, doubt and self-degradation.

This modern problem is not without precedent. What marks its main difference from earlier times is its pervasiveness. The problem appeared in Medieval times in The Canterbury Tales. One of the seven deadly sins treated by Chaucer in "The Parson's Tale" was called "accidia," a spiritual sloth resulting from the perplexities of human existence. Tracing commentary on it back to Augustine, Chaucer said: "Thanne is accidie the anguische of a troubled hert."[1] This anguish is clearly something more than physical laziness; it is a spiritual depression bordering on despair. With certain modifications, this spirit has grown since that time. The name given it has changed through the times ranging from "accidia" in the Middle Ages, to "objective uncertainty" in the Eighteenth Century, and, more recently, to "Weltschmerz"

[1]Geoffrey Chaucer, The Poetical Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, n. ed. (New York: A. L. Burt Publisher, n.d.), p. 542.

and "the existential dilemma."

Whatever it is called, it involves basically similar properties. These can be summarized in a few basic questions, the answers to which are crucial to the formulation of the life man chooses to lead. These are: What is man's position in the universe? Is he on his own, or does God exist? If there is a God, what is His nature and how does man explain the abundance of evil he regularly encounters in life? If there is no God, how does man imbue his life with meaning? These questions are, of course, cosmic and universal--their significance extending well beyond literature into the fields of psychology, theology, and philosophy. The purpose of this thesis is to explain their background and examine them in light of some recent American fiction.

The central issue has its roots deep in the history of Western thought stemming from the writings of Augustine at the turn of the Fifth Century. His doctrines on the questions of predestination and free will assume a Supreme Being a priori and state that though God freely offers his grace to man, He knows the choice that man will make. If man chooses to reject it, he, in essence, rejects salvation, but God knows that this will happen too. In this way Augustine is able to reconcile the two apparently mutually-exclusive concepts. Augustine's philosophy is in this way supernaturally oriented, resolving human conflicts and doubts through the call to accept God's grace.

The Thirteenth Century theologian Thomas Aquinas furthers Augustine's Theocentric principles also stressing man's free will as an explanation of evil in a universe created by an all good and powerful God. Again, conflicts that arise with reason are relegated to the realm of faith and resolved there.

In the Seventeenth Century the French philosopher Blaise Pascal considered the problem. He was concerned with man's position in this vast universe and decided that in order to transcend a feeling of insignificance man must confront the issues of personal choice and emotions to establish an "authentic" life. Yet even then there remained the ultimate question of the frightening uncertainty of death. Although Pascal could never completely resolve this question, he sought to better understand the totality of the greatness and misery of human existence.

In the Nineteenth Century these ideas were developed by the Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard who spoke out against the rise of a humanistic culture-religion that sought to narrow the difference in quality between God and man. He was again theocentric but more metaphysical than his predecessors. He felt that man is necessarily faced with uncertainty upon confronting the mysteries of God and the universe. God, in turn, can be reached only by a leap of faith which is the passionate decision to believe in spite of the uncertainty. Because man cannot know, he must believe or suspend decision.

There is a great risk involved, but without this risk there is no faith, no lasting comfort in a world based strictly on the humanistic ethic. To become a Christian is thus a fearful decision, for it means a blind faith in light of man's conceded guilt and the despair that is inherent in this concession; for only by his admission of guilt does man truly enter into existence. Through this painful process he is able to enter into Christianity which Kierkegaard defines capsulely as "an unlimited humiliation, the boundless grace of God, and a striving born of gratitude."[1] Although he, by his leap of faith, was able to attain belief in God, his writings define the predicament not only for his contemporaries, but also for man of a century later. In spite of his tremendous faith, Kierkegaard acknowledges the doubt inherent in contemplation of the universe: "I contemplate the order of nature in the hope of finding God, and I see omnipotence and wisdom; but I also see much else that disturbs my mind and excites anxiety. The sum of all this is an objective uncertainty."[2]

The Twentieth Century thinkers who take up the cry base their philosophies on the writings of these theologians but differ in one very important respect. As they contemplate

[1]Howard Albert Johnson, "On Kierkegaard," ed. Geddes MacGregor and J. Wesley Robb, Readings in Religious Philosophy (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1962), p. 128.

[2]Johnson, p. 115.

the nature of the universe in an attempt to find God they do not see even Kierkegaard's "objective uncertainty," but rather they see despair in the absence of God. Especially prominent in this mid-Twentieth Century thinking are the Frenchmen Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Writing in the early years of an advancing technological age which was to see man discover the nuclear capability of world annihilation, they could not make that leap of faith, for the chasm had become too great. Man, they felt, has become more than doubtful about the universal scheme of things, he has become absurdly helpless as he can find nothing outside of himself to justify his existence. This painful awareness can end in total despair, but it need not. Their literary output vacilates between hope and despair.

Sartre's first novel, Nausea, which appeared in 1938 is filled with the gloom of despair in man's utter hopelessness in a world in which nothing justifies his existence. His viewpoint fluctuates, however, as his later writings progress from this negative point and posit a qualified message of hope for modern man. His philosophical essay, Being and Nothingness, published in 1943, is but mildly optimistic as it focuses on the terrifying quality of man's total freedom of choice and the anguish he experiences as he chooses. Existentialism and Humanism, published in 1946, along with his play "The Flies," 1943, stress man's ability to accept his existential condition and make of himself all he can by

becoming fully engaged in existence. He can, Sartre says, overcome the degrading state of an indifferent universe and shape himself into a heroic being. However, he later disclaims this extent of man's nobility and re-emphasizes his earlier position of man as absurd.[1]

Camus, a lesser philosopher than Sartre but a greater writer, advances from his early position of despair as evidenced in The Stranger and The Myth of Sisyphus, both appearing in 1942, with their insistence on man's isolation and absurdity. But he employs this nihilism as a means of transcending it. His thrust is toward a much more optimistic view of man who is equipped with total individual freedom and moral responsibility. Man, as the shaper of his own destiny, is responsible for his world. His later works, The Rebel (1954), The Fall (1956), and Exile and the Kingdom (1958) present this theme of hope.

Sartre and Camus have received great plaudits for their existential writing, but American writers have also dealt with these issues. Of special significance is the first American existential novel, Herman Melville's masterpiece, Moby Dick, published in 1851. The great white whale of the title, at the same time beautiful, mysterious and terrible, suggests all of Creation and the Creator Himself.

[1] John Gassner, ed., A Treasury of the Theatre (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964), pp. 466-68.

Man is insulted and maddened at the indifference of God and his awareness of his own insignificance. This insult is not restricted to a few, but rather it is felt by many: Starbuck, the Christian; Pip, the idealistic and innocent youth; as well as by Ahab, the demonic captain of the ill-fated vessel the Pequod. The ship, named after an extinct tribe of Indians, is also doomed to extinction under the hand of its relentless captain who has been maimed by an earlier encounter with the white leviathan. He follows a single-minded course with the sole purpose of hunting down and destroying the whale. Melville invests the whale with all of the evil in existence, and, since he is a God symbol, he suggests not only the indifference of the Deity but also something much less than an all-good nature. And the author invests Ahab with all the suffering, guilt and delusion of mankind. Ahab deludes himself by confusing the role of fate with his own free will in pursuing the whale to his own ultimate destruction. This question of free will versus predestination versus chance is one of many central ideas in the book. Ishmael, the narrator, muses on these complexities as he and his friend Queequeg, the savage, weave a sword-mat:

> This savage's ...easy, indifferent sword must be chance--aye, chance, free will, and necessity--no wise incompatible--all interweavingly working together. The straight warp of necessity, not to be swerved from its ultimate course--its every alternating vibration, indeed, only tending to that; free will still free to ply her shuttle between given threads; and

> chance, though restrained in its play within the right lines of necessity, and sideways in its motions directed by free will, though thus prescribed to by both chance by turns rules either,[1] and has the last featuring blow at events.

Such philosophizing is reminiscent of Augustine and Acquinas except that the God of the early churchmen has become necessity, and chance now has the final say in Melville's scheme of things. It is essential that Ishmael be the sole survivor of the unsuccessful hunt. For he has progressed through his experiences on the Pequod to rid his nature of its deadening misanthropy present at the outset of the voyage and replace it with an acceptance of love of his fellow man--epitomized in his closeness with Queequeg--as the balm against the indifference and evil of existence. His ability to make the necessary compromise in such a world heralds his deliverance from meaninglessness. As he says: "Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye."[2] Ishmael is the only character in the book who can level such an eye. By implication, Melville is suggesting that few men are able to attain this equanimity which is a calm in the

[1]Herman Melville, Moby Dick (New York: The New American Library, 1961), p. 214.

[2]Melville, p. 359.

midst of a maelstrom.[1]

Thus we have in Moby Dick an essentially existential novel complete with a malevolent or at least indifferent universe. Also, there are the various ways in which man confronts this realization, especially the polar attitudes of Ahab and Ishmael: the former lashing out at it in proud, egotistical rage and being destroyed; the latter accepting it with reservation and compromise and being saved.

William Faulkner's Light in August (1932) is another major work in American fiction that deals with the existential dilemma. The church, God's ordained agent on earth, has perverted the concept of a benevolent God into a harsh ideal of strict adherence to a code of behavior that thwarts love and humanity. Joe Christmas is the epitomic victim of this society. An illicit offspring of a possibly miscegenous relationship, he runs a meaningless road in search of his identity and humanity only to be constantly assaulted by abstract codes which prevent his attainment of these. He is a Camus-like stranger, an abstraction created by his grandfather Doc Hines, a racist preacher who sees to it that the stamp of guilt, represented by Negro blood, is branded on him early in his life. Christmas' youth is spent in the home of the rigid Presbyterian McEachern, "the ruthless man who had never known

[1]Many of the ideas advanced here are common to Melville criticism. Especially notable isDenham Sutcliffe's afterword in the Signet Classic Edition already cited.

either pity or doubt."[1] He beats Joe for not learning his catechism and finally confronts him at a dance hall where he is struck down by his adopted son who sets out on his futile journey in pursuit of his own selfhood. After fifteen violent years of wandering, Joe arrives in Jefferson, Mississippi, where he meets Joanna Burden, a guilt-ridden, misplaced Northerner who is absurdly abstract in her views of race and religion. Their relationship revolves around bizarre sexual endeavors that disgust Joe and fill Joanna with guilt. She tries to legitimatize their intimacy by proposing marriage, but Joe refuses. She is overcome with monomania because of their debauchery and undergoes an agonizing repentance. She confronts Joe at gunpoint in an attempt to get him to repent also, and he kills her. He is hunted down, castrated and killed by Percy Grimm who is filled with blind faith in the righteousness of white supremacy. Joe has outraged people because of his failure to fit neatly into a category. When he is caught, he does not fit their preconceived pattern: "He never did anything. He never acted like either a nigger or a white man. That was it. That was what made the folks so mad."[2]

Richard Chase, referring to Robert Penn Warren's

[1]William Faulkner, Light in August (New York: The Modern Library, 1959), p. 133.

[2]Faulkner, p. 306.

critical essay,[1] suggests that Faulkner's objection to the modern world is its inability to set up viable codes and laws. The ones man does set up are too narrow and restricting and prevent him from becoming truly human.[2] Because Joe defies labeling, he is sacrificed by a society that demands it. Faulkner attacks this society of comfortable codes that is form-conscious but content-less. It is only those who give up this false simplicity and become involved in life and death matters that rate any of the author's admiration. Byron Bunch, in his bumbling but genuine attempts to help Lena Grove; and Gail Hightower, in his attempt to save Joe, though it is too late, are the two who choose humanity above freedom from responsibility and provide hope in the endurance of mankind. Lena Grove's arrival in Jefferson on the day of Joanna's murder, her subsequent moving into the cabin on the deceased's land, and her resumed journey after giving birth to her son show from another angle the on-goingness of life despite the evil of the masses who are searching about for someone to crucify.

But, given this base society on the one hand and the few glimmers of hope on the other, the central and most

[1]Robert Penn Warren, "William Faulkner," ed. Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery, William Faulkner: Two Decades of Criticism (East Lansing: Michigan State Press, 1951), p. 86.

[2]Richard Chase, "The Stone and the Crucifixion" Faulkner's Light in August, Two Decades of Criticism, p. 208.

poignant image is that of Joe Christmas himself, "the ultimate personification of modern loneliness,"[1] for his tragedy, not knowing who or what he is, is for the author the worst kind of tragedy.[2] God is dead in Faulkner's universe and society is debased, but individual man is noble, if often tragic, as he strives for meaningful existence in this great abyss.

All of the works heretofore mentioned appeared prior to an historic event of major consequence, the United States' bombing of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Although these actions were heralded by many at the time as harbingers of world peace and deterrents to any further global aggression, they plunged mankind into a new era of nuclear capability sufficient to destroy the planet. This technological achievement added a new dimension to the existential philosophy, for now man had attained the apparent ultimate control over the future of his planet, a difficult concept to reconcile with the theory of an all-powerful and benevolent Supreme Being. This singular event is especially significant in the literature of our nation.

[1]Alfred Kazin, "The Stillness of Light in August," ed. Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery, William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism (East Lansing: Michigan State Press, 1960), p. 248.

[2]Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, eds., Faulkner in the University (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1959), p. 118.

It is the position of this thesis that this one event marks the beginning of a definite trend in American literature. For in the next twenty-five years a number of major works appeared on the scene to deal with the issues of man's plight in the universe. The scope of this thesis includes four such works: Wise Blood (1952), by Flannery O'Connor; Lie Down in Darkness (1951), by William Styron; The Sirens of Titan (1959), by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.; and The Martyred (1964), by Richard Kim.

These four works deal with man's search for meaning in life and his need for values to cling to. For O'Connor there is one absolute value, the existence of God, that transcends all. In Him there is salvation; without Him there is despair. In Styron's book there is chiefly despair, for he feels God is dead for modern intellectual man who finds it extremely difficult to construct viable relative values in place of this void. Vonnegut's God is a totally indifferent one who treats man as an absurd plaything. Vonnegut suggests that only when man comes to this realization and resolves himself to accept what beauty and good he can actually see in his universe is he fulfilled. This thrust is furthered by Kim who suggests that life's meaning lies in man's decision to accept humanity instead of some abstract, absolute truth.

Thus, the four writers come to the central issue from different viewpoints and grapple with it accordingly. And although they hover near the brink, they never fall to despair.

Their purpose is to take the raw materials of uncertainty and make sense of them. The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the effectiveness of their intent.

## Chapter 2

### "If Jesus existed, I wouldn't be clean"

Flannery O'Connor presents the most Christian response to the problem of man's search for meaning. A Catholic writer, she asserts the existence of God as the fundamental absolute value of life. For her, those who reject Him exemplify the "absurd useless passion," of Sartre's vision of man. Those who accept Him are the only ones who can find purpose in life. But unfortunately, the majority have rejected Him. In so doing, they have formed a base society which perpetuates the difficulty of rising above itself to achieve meaning. Thus, man is responsible for the evil that abounds in life, but he is not necessarily doomed to wallow forever in it. For O'Connor provides a mighty ray of hope which is the reality of the grace of God that can transform man from his pitifully absurd state to one of union with the Almighty. She dramatically does this in her portrayal of Hazel Motes, the protagonist of Wise Blood. His life is consumed by the twofold proposition of denial and acceptance of God; the existential dilemma is focal in his daily life.

Hazel is the son of fundamentally religious parents, grandson of a circuit riding preacher, a Christian because of his heritage. With such a background of harshness in God and religion, Haze has little choice but to follow in the

same pattern, and he is at least as harsh as his predecessors and their God in both his early denial and later affirmation of Jesus. Even his physical appearance characterizes him as intense and severe. His facial features are angular, his eyes deeply socketed, his skin but a thin, almost transparent covering of his "insistent"[1] skull. His clothing adds to this bleak image; the "glaring" blue suit, the low slung, wide brimmed hat. It is clear from the outset that there can be no joy in such a person, and his personality complements his physical appearance in this assertion.

Miss O'Connor employs the transplantation-prophecy-return motif in taking Haze away from the small Tennessee town of his youth where he had been infected by Christianity, to the more secular life of the army where he is exposed to counter-propositions which influence his decision to deny Christ.[2] Upon his return he sees his home, the very town of his boyhood, abandoned. He then proceeds to Taulkinham, the city which provides the milieu for the working out of his salvation. Here he encounters a procession of derelict characters against whom we are finally to judge the

[1]Flannery O'Connor, Three by Flannery O'Connor (Wise Blood) (New York: The New American Library Inc., 1962), p. 9. Further quotations from this work are from this edition and appear with the page number in parentheses.

[2]Melvin J. Friedman, "Introduction," The Added Dimension, ed. Melvin J. Friedman and Lewis A. Lawson (New York: Fordham University Press, 1966), pp. 12 and 25.

protagonist: Leora Watts, the prostitute who provides him with his first sexual experience; Asa Hawks, a false prophet who uses religion as a confidence game; Hawks' daughter Sabbath Lily, a totally amoral bastard; Enoch Emery, a simpleton in dire need of personal acceptance; Hoover Shoats, another perverter of religion for economic ends; Shoats' preacher Solace Layfield who is not true to his preachments; and Mrs. Flood, the landlady who tries to comprehend Hazel's actions in his final days. Even early in the book Haze is shown as more honorable in his honest attempts to deal with a theological problem against the backdrop of their hypocrisy and falseness. Later, when he attains his salvation, he exemplifies hope in a basically decadent world peopled by the likes of his contemporaries.[1] Though he appears corrupt and brutal, in the author's own words, "The writer has to make the corruption believable before he can make the grace meaningful."[2]

Deeply influenced by the philosophy of the Catholic theologian Teilhard de Chardin, O'Connor's writing is steeped in the slow evolutionary process of hominisation, "the individual and instantaneous leap from instinct to thought ... [and] the progressive phyletic spiritualization

[1]Carter W. Martin, The True Country (Kingsport, Tennessee: Kingsport Press Inc., 1968), p. 234.

[2]Martin, pp. 28-29.

of human civilization of all the forces contained in the animal world."[1] Hazel slowly rises from a lowly position of blasphemy and corruption to redemption and salvation. It is this progression from negative to positive, from low to high that lies at the center of Miss O'Connor's work.

Hazel Motes tries to impose an absolute upon himself, the non-existence of God. But he finds that this is an attempt on his part to deny a deeper, stronger one that had been instilled within him in his youth. The action of his life centers around the conflict between these two opposing forces. He has been taught as a child that Christ had died for his sins and, through this death, has redeemed man. The guilt that accompanies this is such that Hazel has to repent for his own sins. The idea of redemption is not a peaceful one, but one that means suffering, pain, and anguish. As Haze grows older, he tries to obliterate this belief with its opposite: that Christ could not have died for his sins because Christ, even sin itself, does not exist. Thus, he contends that "Jesus is a trick on niggers" (45). Hazel plunges himself into the task of proving this theory. Whereas in his youth he had felt the need of penance after witnessing a sexual display at a fair, later he seeks to become a whoremonger, to dissipate with no pangs of conscience because,

[1] Teilhard, Pierre, de Chardin, The Phenomenon of Man (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 180.

he feels, conscience itself is a lie, a creation of man.

His method of testing, however, is faulty. He seeks to deny Christ empirically. He feels that the rock-filled shoes he had worn for penance as a boy after the episode at the fair should have produced an open sign of Jesus, a recognition that his sin had been absolved. When nothing happens he concludes there is no Christ and thus he preaches that no one is redeemed because no one can show the place within his body where the redemption has occurred. But neither can he prove the falsity of Christ empirically. What he experiences after his sexual encounters with Mrs. Watts and Sabbath Hawks is only a feeling of physical disgust. He tries to establish a link with God through indulgence in traditionally immoral sexual relationships, reasoning that if God exists surely there will be some retaliation on His part for this blatant sin. However, God chooses not to intervene either directly through some sort of open punishment, or indirectly, through imposed pangs of guilt. Therefore, Haze concludes God does not exist. There are, he feels, no moral implications.

This lack of evidence of vindication prompts him to move on and seek elsewhere. He founds his Church of truth without Jesus Christ crucified and buys a car, a dilapidated, rat colored Essex which is a symbol of his flight from Jesus. More than this, it is his home, his church, his implement of vengeance, his means of escape. As long as it runs he has the license to do as he wishes, believe what he wants, go where

he pleases. Its ruination parallels the disintegration of his own stance. With the mobility the car provides, he feels no need to be justified or saved. The destruction of the car mirrors the destruction of Hazel Motes, preacher in the Church Without Christ. Without the Essex there are no more towns, no more houses, no more places--nothing but Jesus. The loss of this mobility brings into focus the vision of which he has had only intimations before. "Haze stood for a few minutes, looking over the scene. His face seemed to reflect the entire distance across the clearing and beyond, the entire distance that extended from his eyes to the blank gray sky that went on, depth after depth, into space" (113-14). He knows then what he has to do, for he has seen. This is his full elucidation of something hinted at earlier in a similar setting, on a highway overlooking a gully. "He had the feeling that everything he saw was a broken-off piece of some giant blank thing that he had forgotten had happened to him" (44).

Although he has "forgotten," he cannot escape it, for that "giant blank thing" is his relentless pursuer, Jesus. As Mrs. Flood observes, Haze has seen something he cannot get at without being blind to everything else, and his course of action is clear. It is in a matter-of-fact tone that he answers his landlady's question as to what he is going to do. "Blind myself," (114) he says and goes to his room to do it. Throughout his ministry Haze has equated physical sight with the Church Without Christ and physical blindness with the

Redeemer. After Haze finds Jesus, he readily turns full circle, from one polar position to its opposite, unable to accept less, aware that there is no more. The finality of his act of self-inflicted blindness shows the tremendous degree of his absolutist nature and the compelling force of God.

The sight/blindness oxymoron is one of the central metaphors of the book. Although Haze identifies physical eyesight with the church of truth without Jesus crucified and strives to deny the redemptive sacrifice, his appearance hints at a conflict. As Sabbath Hawks observes: "I like his eyes....They don't look like they see what he's looking at but they keep on looking" (62). Haze is seeking an absolute. He has to go on looking until he finds it, regardless of the consequences.

The fiasco of Asa Hawks' attempted self-blinding is important to Haze. Asa's faith has failed him at the crucial moment and he flees from Jesus, unable to accept the guilt implicit in Christianity. Hawks is a prototype of Haze but an imperfect one. As Hazel struggles within himself to find the truth, he discovers Asa's fraud, and it is a crucial discovery. As he peers into the eyes of the preacher, he is again taken back to something within himself, something fundamental and persistent. "Haze's expression seemed to open onto a deeper blankness and reflect something and then close again" (89). Haze recognizes the close parallel between

Hawks and himself. Whereas Haze thinks Asa has been an unbeliever in his youth who has later found Christ, Haze's discovery of the preacher's fraud points to the basic difference between the two men. Hazel Motes is totally committed to truth; Asa Hawks lives his life in flight from it. And although Haze professes that the only truth is that there is no truth and that there are no implications in a future to be concerned about since the only time is the present, Sabbath perceives his true nature: "I knew when I first seen you you were mean and evil ...because you didn't want nothing but Jesus" (102).

It is at this point, after Haze has rejected the new jesus, the grotesque, dwarfed body stolen from the museum by Hazel's disciple Enoch Emery, that he casts away his mother's eye-glasses, the last vestige of his attempt to aid his physical sight, his belief in the nonexistence of Christ. From this point on he seeks only the true Christ, again in an unswerving, absolute manner. This means the destruction of all that is not true, epitomized in the murder of the false prophet, Solace Layfield, whom he runs down with his car. The intensity of this position makes him unable to modify contradictory forces; instead it forces him to destroy them. The oath of violence he expresses when he sees the false preacher's promoter, Hoover Shoats, is more than a preview of the murder he is to commit, it is a reference to everything that does not comply with his absolutist position. "If you

don't hunt it down and kill it, it'll hunt you down and kill you" (91).

Hazel Motes spends his life in this hunt only to become prey himself. His life ends in the condition he has sought to combat, knowledge of God and realization of evil. For as long as he is able to maintain the nonexistence of Jesus, he can live without sin, without guilt. The conversion for which he has striven is the conversion to nothingness. Without a soul, he feels, there can be no evil. What passes for evil in Christianity he views as a lie, a trick of faith. Belief in nothing is his ideal. The Christian idea of redemption is not peaceful for it carries with it guilt, sorrow, and suffering. Only through the absence of the Christian complex of fall, redemption and judgment can there be true peace for man. The Church Without Christ denies the miracle of salvation; the blind do not see, the lame do not walk, the dead do not rise. If a new jesus can be produced, Haze thinks, one that looks unlike other men, yet is totally human and non-divine, he can more easily demonstrate the philosophy of his church. However, when such a jesus appears, Haze destroys him.

Although he struggles to maintain his philosophical position, he is forced into conversion. In his intensity, he feels he still has a future in the Church Without Christ, but that phase of his religion has run out. As the policeman pushes the Essex into a gully he pushes with it the final emblem of the Church of Truth without Jesus Christ crucified.

Haze has found Jesus, the opposite for which he has searched, and, in his single-mindedness, he can not have Him without being shut of everything else. His self-blinding is the final affirmation of achievement. Having accepted Christ and, with Him, all the ramifications of sin and salvation, blindness is an aid. As Haze confides to his landlady: "If there's no bottom in your eyes, they hold more" (121). The eyes of Hazel Motes hold salvation, an absolute, singular salvation; one that has no place for anyone else, not the bastard daughter of the preacher, not Mrs. Flood who seeks it through him, but one salvation for one man.

Haze feels he is clean as long as Christ does not exist. The discovery of His existence makes him unclean, because it necessitates penance. Since he has been so far from the new found truth, since he has combated it so stringently, Haze has to pay a high price in terms of physical torment, and this he does with quiet resolution. The penance he inflicts upon himself cannot be abated; he can have no comfort nor contentment. His single-minded act of contrition cannot tolerate the interference of Mrs. Flood, so he sets out in the cold, knowing there is no other place to go, finding only death. The torture he imposes upon his body is the logical culmination of that which he had suffered as a child. Since his sins are greater--impurity has been replaced by blasphemy--he has to pay a higher price for them.

When Mrs. Flood asks him why he does not continue

preaching, he responds that he has no time. He sees the sole function of his life in blindness as one gigantic act of contrition. He needs his whole time to pay, for, since Christ exists, he is not clean. How much better it would have been, he feels, not to believe, hence, to be clean. Mrs. Flood has great difficulty in understanding her boarder. He mystifies her and she feels cheated out of something that close observation of Hazel should provide. Her scrutiny of Haze leads her to a deeper realization as she seeks the implications of his blindness. She tries to imagine what blindness is like but can do so only figuratively: "She imagined it was like you were walking in a tunnel and all you could see was a pin point of light. She had to imagine the pin point of light; she couldn't think of it at all without that. She saw it as some kind of a star, like the star on Christmas cards. She saw him going backwards to Bethlehem and she had to laugh" (119).

She laughs because she has always professed no belief in Jesus. But, having lived with Haze's experience, she is beginning to doubt her earlier atheistic position. Haze has infected her with guilt and Christ, and she has to find out more, to know what he knows that drives him to such torture, to see what he sees that enables him to accept it. Examining him after his death, she finally attains the beginnings of understanding:

> The outline of a skull was plain under his skin and the deep burned eye sockets seemed to lead into the dark tunnel where he had

> disappeared. She leaned closer and closer to his face, looking deep into them, trying to see how she had been cheated or what had cheated her, but she couldn't see anything. She shut her eyes and saw the pin point of light, but so far away that she could not hold it steady in her mind. She felt as if she were blocked at the entrance of something. She sat staring with her eyes shut into his eyes; and felt as if she had finally got to the beginning of something she couldn't begin, and she saw him moving farther and farther away, farther and farther into the darkness until he was the pin point of light (126).

Haze, by example, has become the faint ray of hope for another. He has not sought this, but it has inadvertently happened through the closeness of the landlady and her boarder during his time of repentance. That "pin point of light" that is Haze will cause Mrs. Flood untold anguish and sorrow as she will now have to cleanse herself of sin. In this sense, Haze becomes a redeemer himself; ironically not the preacher who tries to convert people to nothingness, but a guilt-ridden, pain-suffering discoverer of Christ. On purpose he has tried to keep awareness of Jesus to himself; by example he converts a woman who would have been a fine member of his Church Without Christ Crucified to a seeker after Jesus. Like Christ, his spirit lives on after his life has ended. The implications of his example are such that Mrs. Flood can never again rest contentedly in non-belief but will seek that terrible mystery that will burden her throughout her life.

While Mrs. Flood gains knowledge from Haze, Enoch Emery already possesses knowledge that would affect Haze.

Enoch is the mystic who knows all along that Haze will find Jesus. It is he to whom the title refers. After Haze has attempted to abandon him, Enoch confronts the young prophet: "You act like you think you got wiser blood than anybody else ...but you ain't! I'm the one has it. Not you. Me" (36). The author reiterates Enoch's self appraisal of omniscience: "He knew by his blood. He had wise blood like his daddy" (46). Enoch knows from the outset what Haze is to seek. "I knew when I first seen you you didn't have nobody nor anything but Jesus. I seen you and I knew it" (36).

Ironically, Enoch is the only convert to the Church Without Christ, although basically as a result of a misinterpretation. Haze is speaking only figuratively when he calls out for a new jesus, for he preaches nihilism, professing belief in nothing. But Enoch, taking him literally, produces the dwarfed figure and treats him reverently, even preparing a tabernacle-like repository for him. Martin calls Enoch the true existentialist, embodying Sartre's "thrust for existences" believing "in his own blood, in his own identity as the ultimate measure of truth."[1]

His religion is a sterile neo-paganism. Closely aligned with animals throughout the book, as evidenced in his daily visits to the zoo, he is last seen in the culmination of his nature dressed in a gorilla suit standing

[1]Martin, p. 67.

overlooking the city. It is no accident that he is referred to in his final appearance not as a man in a gorilla suit, but as "the gorilla" (108). As Jonathan Baumbach observes, this "constitutes a reversal of the evolutionary process and is an absurd, grotesque redemption."[1] He has reached his "culmination in the epitome of bestiality, isolation, and spiritual emptiness."[2]

Unlike Hazel, Enoch has abandoned the reasoning faculties. Haze is primarily guided by his mind, although he comes to his realization through suffering non-intellectually: "The Dionysiac complex ...is full of wisdom and knowledge, but its knowledge is passionate, intuitive, poetic--folk knowledge, or blood-knowledge, rising out of a deeper union with earth and time."[3] Enoch is totally the agent of his blood. The duality of the natures of these two men is the duality present in the nature of a single man, the conflict between reason and instinct, between thought and emotion. For O'Connor, reason and thought are the more admirable qualities. For, although Hazel's life is filled with physical suffering and emotional anguish, Enoch's is filled with absurdity.

[1]Jonathan Baumbach, Landscape of Nightmare (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 91.

[2]Martin, p. 71.

[3]Sister M. Bernetta Quinn, OSF, "Flannery O'Connor, A Realist of Distances," The Added Dimension, p. 178.

The plight of Hazel Motes is that he cannot escape Jesus. Imbued from the beginning with the Christian concept, he tries to create for himself a more comfortable belief, one devoid of guilt and suffering. But his true nature, one so intrinsically intense that Enoch and Sabbath are able to perceive it even under his atheistic professions, conquers him. It is a rueful victory in that it makes Haze unclean, guilt-ridden and punishable; but from this sorrow comes his salvation. As an absolutist Haze has no choice but to turn from his nihilistic life where sin does not exist to the bitter implications of the Christian sacrifice. He is well aware of the effect of these implications in himself, for, all along he concedes that if Christ is real, he is unclean. In his cleansing, Hazel is as stoic in his acceptance of Christ as he had been adamant in his denial.

It may seem paradoxical to some readers that Haze, the saved Christian, is such a violent character. But, as Louis Rubin points out in his essay: "The violence of Hazel Motes is the warped and inarticulate protest of one for whom salvation is of crucial importance, against a society for whom God is dead."[1] This society is not only that of the book, but also the public for which Miss O'Connor is writing. Deeply concerned with the role of the Christian writer, trying to

[1]Louis D. Rubin, "Flannery O'Connor and the Bible Belt," The Added Dimension, p. 58.

avoid didacticism in a religiously and morally centered work, she writes in a letter: "I have got to the point now where I keep thinking more and more about the presentation of love and charity, or better call it grace, as love suggests tenderness, whereas grace can be violent or would have to be to compete with the kind of evil I can make concrete."[1]

She feels the urgent need to convince her readers of the evils of an un-Christian world. As she states in her introduction to Wise Blood: "That belief in Christ is to some a matter of life and death has been a stumbling block for readers who would prefer to think it a matter of no great consequence. For them Hazel Motes' integrity lies in his trying with such vigor to get rid of the ragged figure /Jesus/ who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind. For the author Hazel's integrity lies in his not being able to" (8). That is to say: the integrity of the absolutist is to accept his absolute.

Finally, there is the issue of the gothic aspects of O'Connor's fiction. Martin writes: "Flannery O'Connor conveys the horror of responsibility, judgment, and the burden of morality, all presupposing a set of values that transcend the individual and dignify him by their demands."[2] With this in mind it is difficult to understand comments concerning the

[1]Martin, p. 84.

[2]Martin, p. 160.

"grotesque" nature of Miss O'Connor's writing such as this one by Irving Malin: "Miss O'Connor's ability to render the grotesque--her worship of the pre-Christian?--is greater than her ability to capture Hazel's conversion. Wise Blood runs erratically."[1] Malin apparently fails to see the absolutist nature of the protagonist. So caught up in his commentary on the "grotesque," a favorite critical word in reference to O'Connor, he confuses technique with end product. Haze is "grotesque," as are all the characters in the book, because he is human. As O'Connor says, "We are all grotesque....Few of us have stared at that /Good/ long enough to accept the fact that its face too is grotesque, that in us the good is something under construction."[2]

Haze's conversion is such a "good ... under construction." And when it is completed, the sensitive reader knows it. The blasphemous verbosity of his early nihilism becomes quiet contemplation. Indeed, he is reluctant to speak after his redemption and does so only sparingly. His conversion is the reality of his life and the verity of the book.

If the conclusion is not perfectly lucid, it is because of the nature of the subject matter which prohibits complete elucidation, not because of any fault of the writer. Flannery

[1] Irving Malin, "Flannery O'Connor and the Grotesque," The Added Dimension, p. 113.

[2] The Added Dimension, p. 255.

O'Connor fully realizes this:

> The serious fiction writer will think that any story that can be entirely explained by the adequate motivation of the characters or by a believable imitation of a way of life or by a proper theology, will not be a large enough story for him to occupy himself with. This is not to say that he doesn't have to be concerned with them only because the meaning of his story does not begin except at a depth where these things have been exhausted. The fiction writer presents mystery through manners, grace through nature, but when he finishes, there always has to be left over that sense of Mystery which cannot be accounted for by any human formula.[1]

In Wise Blood Flannery O'Connor has dealt completely with all but that unaccountable "sense of Mystery."

[1]Flannery O'Connor, Everything That Rises Must Converge (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1967), pp. xxi-xxii.

## Chapter 3

### "We have lost our love words"

The hope embodied by Hazel Motes in Miss O'Connor's work is not to be found in William Styron's first novel, Lie Down in Darkness. For, whereas Wise Blood postulates the existence of God and the redemptive power of His grace, Styron's work is all but void of such hope. The question of God's existence becomes a relative one: He exists for the lowly and uninformed; He does not exist for modern intellectual man. This curse of awareness is portrayed through the disintegration of a potentially distinguished Virginia family.

Milton Loftis is a competent lawyer and aspiring politician whose career is ruined by his drinking and his extra-marital affair with Dolly Bonner, a weak-willed female who has little to recommend her but an attractive pair of legs. But even the ruination of his career is a mild loss in comparison to the total destruction of his family. The story recounts the events of the previous quarter century within the framework of the funeral day of the most poignant victim of the decadent family, the daughter Peyton.

After a tumultuous childhood and a flamboyant college career Peyton Loftis marries an artist, Harry Miller. A product of the destructive forces of her home life, she is unable

to cope with the reality of the adult world, unable to fill her void of self-identity. After struggling pathetically to make some sense of life, she ends in despair and commits suicide.

Her mother, Helen, is equally pathetic in her struggle for meaningful existence. She professes a belief in God and religion, but the basis of this belief dwindles from the superficiality of her attraction to the minister Carey Carr, to self righteousness: "I love my God ... and you /Milton/ don't have any God at all.... I know what sin is.... In knowing that I'll always be superior to you."[1] Her religion continues its rapid decline to vengeance: "She ... tried to pray--not for guidance, which seemed too vague and elementary, but rather that God please simply give her the logic to direct blame in the proper direction" (125). And finally, on the way to the cemetery, she admits to Carey her spiritual regression to contemptuous denial: "God deserted me. Before that. When Maudie died.'... Helen had told him that everything was finished, there was no God, no anything" (227).

Carey, Helen's confidant, realizes the utter desolation of her life. He muses: "She would never cry;... It was hopeless. She had lost the capacity for love or grief" (102).

[1]William Styron, Lie Down in Darkness (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1951), p. 89. Further quotations from this work are from this edition and appear with the page number in parentheses.

In place of these she nurtures a bitter hatred: "She's lost love and grief, maybe, he thought, but not hate. Not hate" (229). Helen's rigid pride and selfishness prevent her from taking the necessary step toward the love that could have saved her. Again Carey observes, after one of their counseling sessions, that "here was a woman who had not been the dupe of life; but had been too selfish, too unwilling to make the usual compromise, to be happy" (119).

As we shall see through further examination, this "compromise," though unrealized in this novel, represents Styron's faint ray of hope. With God absent, the author concludes that man is on his own to eke out whatever happiness and meaning he can in life; and this demands a certain flexibility to yield to others in key instances where emotions such as pride and grief make yielding the most difficult. The Loftis's continuous failure to make the necessary compromises seals their doom, for as they miss numerous opportunities for love they are left alienated from one another and insecure within themselves, a condition wholly incompatible with full self realization as the basis of genuine love. As David Galloway points out: "The chief concern of this novel is with the efforts of Milton and Helen Loftis and their daughter Peyton to arrive at some sort of personal identification ... their incompleteness is part of the status quo of

this ... novel."[1]

The other member of the family is an older daughter, Maudie, who also dies at an early age. Physically crippled and mentally retarded, it is she to whom Helen clings most closely, finding in her a nostalgic hope of youthful innocence which she can never recapture. It is for Maudie's sake, and by association her own, that she tries, however inadequately, to hold things together. But even then she feels the premonition of disaster. Frustrated by Milton's drinking and suspicious of his affair with Dolly, she seeks in her own proud way to place some sort of blame on him, to make him responsible for the annihilation she feels is imminent. In response to his imploring "Helen, I love you. Do you believe that?" (61) she strikes out at him: "I don't know....If it weren't for Maudie-- ... I don't think I'd be able to live with you any more. I just think you're going to destroy us all" (61). But she goes further than restricting the blame to her husband; she holds Peyton equally responsible.

The mother senses the presence of evil and betrayal as she watches Milton and Peyton play together: "Look at them, look at their sin, look how they have betrayed you both; you and that feeble beloved heart behind you [Maudie] that must vanish soon. One has betrayed you through infidelity and the

[1]David D. Galloway, The Absurd Hero in American Fiction (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966), p. 55.

other through vice and meanness: the ingratitude of a shameless child" (111).

The question of blame is important to Styron and the difficulty he has in placing it underlies his own uncertainty as to its origin. As Ernest Kaiser points out in his essay on another of Styron's novels, The Confessions of Nat Turner, "Styron is angry at the evil of the social environment which destroys people, but he feels that the trouble is mystical and hidden in the soul."[1] Consequently, the guilt for the destruction of the family is not easily placed. Neither Milton, Helen nor Peyton is solely responsible; none can totally escape responsibility. The questions of which one is the instigator and which one plays the greatest part are not important; they all have a share. As Carey observes:

> Who was to blame? Mad or not, Helen had been beastly. She had granted to Loftis, in her peculiarly unremitting way, no forgiveness or understanding, and above all, she had been beastly to Peyton. Yet, Loftis himself had been no choice soul; and who, finally, lest it be God himself, could know where the circle composed as it was of such tragic suspicions and misunderstandings, began, and where it ended? Who was the author of the original misdeed? Peyton, think of Peyton. Was she beyond reproach? Other children had risen above even worse difficulties. Maybe Peyton was the answer (228).

[1]Ernest Kaiser, "The Failure of William Styron," ed. John Henrik Clarke, William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 51.

Actually, Peyton is more of a question than an answer. Her insanity, the feeling of drowning, the imagined pursuing birds, the despair that haunts her through the last days of her short life are in large part a product of her youth in the Loftis home. Her relationship as a child with her father is mutually destructive. The love Loftis showers on her is passionately physical and unnatural. As her time is running out she thinks back to her youth and her father: "I remember Bunny's /Milton's/ hand, and the way the sand came up between my toes, the paint chemical and hot on the swarming summer air, swimmers beyond and gulls floating in the blinding blue; then he squeezed my hand and I remember remembering I will remember this forever (352--emphasis Styron's). And when she pleads with her estranged husband to take her back again, her mind turns once more to her father and associates him with her guilt: "I have not fornicated in the darkness because I wanted to but because I was punishing myself for punishing you: yet something far past dreaming or memory, and darker than either impels me, and you do not know, for once I awoke, half-sleeping, and pulled away. 'No, Bunny,' I said. That fright"(359).

This fear of her father's physical passion is not unfounded, for he had demonstrated sensuality when she was quite small. As Peyton recalls the scene: "I had a silver gown on that you could almost see through, then he took me in his lap and when I jumped up I saw his face; it was red and

tense like a baby's when it goes off in the diapers. You must be a good girl, honey; don't mind what I do" (342).

But Milton is by no means a malicious child molester. Rather, the great love he feels for Peyton, the "beautiful part of himself," (42) overflows the normal bounds of paternal feeling. He has quite unwittingly spoiled her. Indeed, he feels himself the victim, rather than the aggressor, for Peyton is able to manipulate him easily. Just prior to the wedding, it is Peyton who entices him to drink against his will. As he pours out the drinks he thinks to himself, "It was unfair of Peyton to seduce him like this" (252). It is essential to note the verb "seduce." As Loftis views his daughter from behind while she is exchanging wedding vows, his overpowering lust for her overcomes his consciousness and he considers her in mature, physical, sexual terms. "He saw Peyton, those solid curved hips trembling ever so faintly; he thought desperately, hopelessly, of something he could not admit to himself, but did: of now being above--most animal and horrid, but loving--someone young and dear that he had loved ever since he was child enough to love the face of woman and the flesh, too. Yes, dear God, he thought (and he thought dear God, what am I thinking?) the flesh, too, the wet hot flesh, straining like a beautiful, bloody savage" (258).

Following the ceremony, overcome with liquor, his passion and jealousy overwhelms him, and he kisses his daughter

violently in his last futile attempt to have her to himself. The light-hearted warning he gives his new son-in-law, "They'll [Loftis women] really love you to death if you give 'em half a chance," (269) is too late to save anyone--too late for love, too late to save them all from the despair that exists in the absence of genuine, sustaining love. Carey's reference to weddings as "the symbolic affirmation of a moral order in the world" (236) is heavily laden with irony as the entire wedding day becomes a debacle; from the bride's and her father's early drinking, through their drunkenness, to the vicious confrontation between mother and daughter, to the newlyweds' departure on the ferry--the bride already contemplating suicide.

Their lives continue their downward trek after Peyton's marriage. Hers is the most graphic in its degradation, but her parents are also plunged low, none of them able to resurface to save themselves or one another. The pattern has been formulated long before, and the ensuing events of their lives merely reinforce it. They are unable to create legitimate, personal standards to save themselves. Where there should have been the deepest love there is incestuous lust, where there should have been a personal commitment there is perversion of love into hatred, compassion into vengeance. The family's clumsy groping in the absence of meaning produces nothing of substance, nothing to arrest the deterioration that has set in since the time of Milton's boyhood and his father's words

to him which depict the baseness of man's position: "My son ... we stand at the back door of glory. Now in this setting part of time we are only relics of vanquished grandeur more sweet than God himself might have imagined: we are the driblet turds of angels, not men but a race of toads, vile mutations who have lost our lovewords" (174).

The advice his father offers in lieu of this demeaning condition is that man should assert himself, deny the life of passion in pursuit of stoicism and self respect where love is the only constant: "My son, never let passion be a guide. Nurture hope like a flower in the most barren grounds of trouble. If love has fed the flame of your brightest imaginings then passion will perish in that flame and only love endure" (41).

But Milton feels incapable of such self assertion, for he is a determinist: "Life tends toward a moment. Not just the flesh. Not a poet or a thief, I could never exercise free will" (12). He tries, but he is too weak to be effective. Viewing a world devoid of intrinsic honor he sees value in imbuing it with that admirable virtue. He makes sacrifices to achieve this goal, but he is unsuccessful. He swallows his pride subjecting himself to Helen, even ridding himself of Dolly, really believing his words to his wife: "I tell you, Helen, that we can defeat fear and grief and everything else if you'll only believe me and love me again. Honey, we can never die" (243). It works for a moment, but

it is too late to be of any lasting value. Steeped in the pattern developed over the years, Helen and Peyton destroy his attempt, not even realizing there is anything of substance to destroy.

This epitomizes their dilemma: each member of the family is an entity unto himself. The joys they seek and the frustrations they realize are the result of their inability to develop a mutually beneficial relationship of compassion, respect, and love. Self-indulgence is also a great contributing factor. Not just Milton's drinking, but Peyton's uncompromising whims and Helen's undisciplined emotions. Each seeks stability, but each searches for it independently.

Even Carey, the minister, the counselor, cannot attain serenity because he feels God has not revealed Himself totally to him. It is, quite logically, through Carey that Styron professes much of his religious viewpoint. The inadequacy that the minister feels is, for Styron, inevitable since the clergy is peddling a dead commodity: "In a day when a minister felt perpetually deserted, when the one thing one wanted most was to be able to offer spiritual guidance,... what could he say? Nothing really" (119-20). It is no wonder that Carey is unable to comfort Helen's sorrow and curb her hatred, for he lacks the very thing he tries to convince her to accept. Like all the characters in the story, he also is "forever apart from true Christian peace" (121). And so, for the reader, Carey's words of spiritual guidance ring with an empty

sound; indeed, they become ironical, the antithesis of that which they are supposed to mean. For instance, his impassioned advice to Helen on the various levels of love. He says to her that one's ability to say "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith ... is a tribute to the faith and strength and love of one's self which becomes the love of others, and which is the timeless love of God" (120). His situation sums up Styron's position; because God's love does not exist, and since it is considered the basis for the other two types, love of self and others, these become most difficult, if not impossible, to attain.

So even Carey Carr, in his position as God's spokesman on earth, is no more nor less than any other intellectually aware man. But he would gladly change this awareness for a more simplistic view, one that holds more comfort and less doubt: "If I had been a Baptist everything would be black and white. I'd pick and choose either sinfulness or sinlessness" (105). In this way Carey is much like Helen. "He sensed a strange kinship with this woman: what was it?" (107). It is their overpowering need for a concrete absolute to cling to. They cannot accept any halfway measures, they need some sign that their life counts for something. Yet the sign never comes. This same unwillingness to bend, to compromise, to accept human existence for what it is, an imperfect, often mysterious state, is the downfall of all the principal characters. Because they are unable to totally embrace a Christ

who gives no outward signs of his existence, they are unable to form a basis for embracing each other in a spirit of profound human love.

How much more fortunate are the lowly Negroes who are able to accept Christ in a peacefulness and serenity that thrives even in the face of mystery. Their vision of the savior enables them to endure in a world of suffered inequities. Unable to look too deeply or intellectually, they are yet able to accept the spirit of the Lord. Or, in other words, in Styron's estimation of the issue, the simpler and less refined, less aware, a man's mind is, the easier it is for him to accept a mystery as great as that of the existence of God and thus be spared from the harsh reality of this fabrication. Such a man is not equipped to examine the feasibility of such a profound mystery. Rather, he is conditioned by his heritage to accept it without question, fearful of even slight doubt, confident that God has sustained him to his present point and will raise him to great heights in reward for his unswerving devotion. And most importantly, this love of God serves as the basis for his love of his fellow man. And for Styron, where there is human love, there is true humanity and meaning in life; where this love is absent there is despair.

Milton Loftis, in his desperate search to find love, epitomizes the all-impelling need for this quality that is able to transcend life's futility. He tries to love his wife, Helen, but her preoccupation with Maudie prevents her from

devoting the necessary time and effort to accept and return it. Feeling more desperate he turns to Dolly for love, but there he finds only the physical attributes which, by themselves, repel after awhile. Of course all along he loves Peyton, but wrongly; not as a father loves his daughter, but as a suitor, a coveter, a seducer. Musing back on one of the early women in his life, he glimpses other reasons for the problem. He does not really know what love is. He tries like Helen to analyze, intellectualize, somehow explain it. But such is not the way of love; it "comes as easy as morning and never leaves" (185). For Milton such a morning never arrives.

In fact, such a morning comes for only one of the Loftis family, the dying Maudie. She finds her absolute in Benny, a half-Indian, half-Negro construction worker. During afternoons when she takes water to the workmen near the Loftis home, she is fascinated by Benny's magic tricks. Their final meeting one rainy afternoon marks the pinnacle of Maudie's life, the point after which she dies in serenity. Benny's image against the stormy sky is that of a high priest or a Christ: "His arms were raised above his head, skinny and straight and motionless like a man supplicating heaven and the sky" (211). The closeness of their relationship is marked by their ability to communicate nonverbally. There is a certain unity of the spirit upon which Helen is later able to speculate: "After all these years she'd found it: a lover,

father, magic--something" (212). And though this encounter marks the termination of their relationship, although Maudie tries to prolong it, she is resigned in the end, becoming "silent and peaceful" (213).

Thus, Maudie attains the only peace in the disintegrating family: the peace so desperately sought by the other members. Maudie's infirmity is her strength. Her inarticulateness accepts the mysterious love; her simple-mindedness allows it to rest without analysis. Fulfillment comes to her at her low, simple level of human existence, and it veils itself in magic. It is inexplicable, but nonetheless of paramount value as it is the only thing that is able to give peace.

In the characterization of Maudie, Styron reinforces the point he makes with the Negroes in the story. It is the seeming paradox that those who are the least aware and least sensitive--the Negroes because of their downtrodden history; Maudie because of her congenital deficiency--are the ones most able to establish purpose in life. Modern technological man has lost this instinctive ability.

Styron uses traditionally meaningful observances to undercut the family's dilemma in its alienation from the peace and tranquility usually associated with such occasions--Peyton's wedding and Christmas. Gathered around the table for the Yule dinner wearing pathetically absurd paper hats, the Loftises are fully aware of their hopeless plight: "Each of them took

a lasting fatal measurement: of whose guilt, of whose love or hatred, and why, of the length that all this could endure. ... Only Maudie escaped: oblivious" (161).

Maudie's sister Peyton craves such a simplistic answer as she gropes wildly, trying to hold on to what life she has left, but she lacks the naive innocence that Styron implies is necessary yet all but unattainable for modern man. The gothic descriptions of those who possess it, the primitive riverside rites of the blacks, the crippled body and mind of Maudie, depict the remoteness from the lives of ordinary man. For without love man is but an absurd victim in a meaningless world. His knowledge of love accentuates his incompleteness resultant from his inability to attain it. As Milton observes: "They should have never put the idea of love in the mind of an animal" (296). The fact that this animal is able to comprehend makes the lack of attainment all the more tragic. They are all aware of the importance of love, but they all pervert it in their erring attempts to achieve it. Helen's love is cold, sterile and underdeveloped, based on self pity which drives Milton to the opposite extreme of an intensely physical, sexual desire for Dolly Bonner and his own daughter. And Peyton's is a guilt-ridden nymphomania which haunts her to her self-imposed end.

Although she desires to acknowledge her guilt and seek forgiveness, it is too late. As she says to herself just before her leap: "Undivorced from guilt, I must divorce

myself from life" (364). The uncontrollable rushes of her mind, her preoccupation with drowning and the horrible pursuit of the imaginary relentless birds are the product of her upbringing in the Loftis household, an environment devoid of genuine life-giving love. But they are more than that. They are also the product of the age in which she lives, an age in which, for Styron, God is dead. Her thoughts during the final moments of her life combine the personal and societal predicament, the human condition that has witnessed no evidence of hope yet cannot completely abandon it:

> ...oh my God, why have I forsaken You? Have I through some evil inherited in a sad century cut myself off from You forever, and thus only by dying must take the fatal chance: to walk into a dark closet and lie down there and dream away my sins, hoping to wake in another land, in a far, fantastic dawn?... I knew He wasn't listening, marking the sparrow but not me. So to hell (365).
>
> I thought, oh Christ, have mercy on your Peyton this evening not because she hasn't believed but because she, No one, had a chance to, ever (367).
>
> Perhaps I shall rise at another time, though I lie down in darkness and have my light in ashes (368).

Styron is graphic in his indictment of life without love. Despair is echoed by both Milton and Helen at different times in their repeated forlorn laments: "Nothing! Nothing! Nothing!" (369 and 370). For that is all that remains in a world where love is absent. The Negroes in their primitive

faith and love can hear "the clatter of the opening of everlasting gates and doors;" (382) modern man who has lost these trappings of endurance and salvation can only expect to "lie down in darkness, and have his light in ashes ... for diuturnity is a dream and folly of expectation" (6).

Styron's portrayal of life without love is extremely pessimistic. The bleakness inherent in such a depiction has prompted much negative criticism. For example, William Van O'Conner calls him an empty rhetorician: "Styron is about as gifted a stylist as anyone now writing, but apparently he has nothing important to say."[1] This appears to be a subconscious attempt on the part of such critics to block out what Styron is saying because it is such an unpleasant statement. Quite simply put, his position is that God does not exist for modern intellectual man who, in his painful awareness of this void, is unable to construct meaningful alternatives to exert purpose in his life. Would Mr. O'Conner also contend that Sartre has nothing to say? If he is consistent he should, for their themes are very similar.

Another troubled critic, Jonathan Baumbach, seems to be struggling to create optimism where Styron did not put it as he talks about Peyton's salvation through her death. He

[1]William Van O'Connor, "John Updike and William Styron: The Burden of Talent," Contemporary American Novelists, ed. Harry T. Moore (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), pp. 220-21.

construes the final scene, the Negro riverside baptismal rites, as an affirmation of Peyton's salvation stating that the "ceremony achieves a special resonance as a symbol of the redemption of Peyton's life and of the possible salvation of our own."[1] In so saying, he commits the fault of so many critics who refuse to accept the possibility that a writer may not be affirming hope and salvation in a particular work but, rather, desolation and despair. If the final scene serves any major thematic function, and because of its length and terminal position it certainly must, it is to heighten the despair of modern man by depicting the faith which is so simple for the lowly but impossible for himself. The novel ends as it began, with a downward thrust.

Perhaps David L. Stevenson, in his essay on Styron, touches on the reason for so much of the novel's negative criticism. He states that it, like much of the literature of the fifties, differs from the highly acclaimed writing of the quarter century between the wars (Lewis, Cather, Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, etc.) because of the unsettling aspect of its central message which is "the discomfort of provoking in us a deeply-rooted sense of the possible meaninglessness of existence, of making us aware of characters (Peyton Loftis, Cass Kinsolving [the latter from Styron's third work Set This House On Fire ]) more neurotic

[1] Baumbach, p. 133.

than we are who may seem to be (alas!) a heightening and mirroring of our own worst moments."[1]

As Ivan Karamazov says, "If God is dead, everything is permissible."[2] Styron might paraphrase this to read "If God is dead, everything is onerous." Humanity still has a chance if it can sustain itself by developing genuine love; if human decency can prevail; and if man can heighten his nobility and dignity. These are impossibilities for one Virginia family, but they are challenges to the rest of mankind.

[1]David Stevenson, "William Styron and the Fiction of the Fifties," Recent American Fiction: Some Critical Reviews, ed. Joseph J. Waldmeir (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1963), p. 274.

[2]Baumbach, p. 128.

## Chapter 4

### "A purpose of human life ... is to love whoever is around to be loved"

The overriding pessimism of Styron's world view is basically that of a defeated existentialist. The characters in his novel are unable to form themselves any ennobling spirit, unable to resign themselves placidly to an absurd universe, unable even to posit the minimal amount of meaning in their lives necessary to endure. So, for Styron, their end is despair.

For Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., such absurdity need not necessarily end in despair. As a black humorist he is closely related to the existentialists, but the two positions differ in one very important aspect. Whereas the existentialist views the world as absurd, the black humorist sees the same world as a ridiculous joke. Whereas existentialism's response to the dismal and degrading condition it sees as life is a scorn that can, at best, culminate in resignation, black humor's response is that of laughter, its remedy is to teach man how to take a joke.

Black humor seems to be the next logical step after existentialism as modern times have reached a point of such absurdity that they seem at odds with the resignation of the existentialists. The writers of black humor still hold to

the desirability of love and beauty, but their chief instrument of humanization is the power of laughter. Rejecting all ethical absolutes, while retaining a certain amount of faith in art as an instrument that can bring about minimal evanescent changes in the reader, laughter is their most logical response to such a universe.[1]

Such a response abounds in Vonnegut's early novel, The Sirens of Titan, first published in 1959, then out of print for several years, and now rediscovered as something more than a light work of science fiction. Between the opening epigraph, "I guess somebody up there likes me,"[2] and its slight transformation as the concluding line of the novel, "Don't ask me why, old sport,... but somebody up there likes you," (319) Vonnegut has bombarded the reader with laughter, both serious and slapstick, as he undercuts all that is serious and important to modern society. But it is not irony and sarcasm for their own sake. Rather, he has a significant purpose, that of the black humorist as outlined by Scholes in his article. The overriding aim of such a writer, says the critic, is to keep humanity in shape during a desperate time in which it seems to be trying to destroy itself. Such an aim

[1]Robert Scholes, "Mithridates, he died old: Black Humor and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.," The Hollins Critic, Vol. III, No. 4 (October, 1966), pp. 2-5.

[2]Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., The Sirens of Titan (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1971), p. 7. Further quotations from this work are from this edition and appear with the page number in parentheses.

must begin at the individual level of personal consciousness. It must be kept free, vigorous and expanding to be able to penetrate the ever-growing moral pollution. Black humor, as a movement, does not presume any authoritarian doctrine of moral certainty, nor does it nostalgically point to earlier times as an ideal to be regained. Its world view of horrendous conditions prohibits any reduction to a simplistic formula.[1]

To this credo Vonnegut is true. He begins his task by ridiculing the idea of inherent purpose in life and the existence of a benevolent God. For it is only after this framework of impediments to personal happiness is destroyed, suggests Vonnegut, that man can flourish as a human being. He posits this idea in his address to the graduates of Bennington College in June of 1970: "I used to think that science would save us. But only in superstition is there hope. I beg you to believe in the most ridiculous superstition of all: that humanity is at the center of the universe, the fulfiller or the frustrater of the grandest dreams of God Almighty. If you can believe it, human beings might stop treating each other like garbage."[2] For Vonnegut the "dreams of God Almighty" are superstition; humanity is his conviction.

Such concern for mankind establishes him in the

[1]Scholes, p. 11.

[2]Time, Vol. 95, No. 26, (June 29, 1970), p. 8.

tradition of recent humanitarian American authors, notably Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck. Indeed, it is not too far-fetched to imagine this part of his commencement address as a speech on a much loftier occasion, for it strikes chords of resonance with the Nobel Prize acceptance speeches of the three aforementioned writers. However, Vonnegut's optimism is always mixed with a certain amount of bleakness and despondency. For in the same speech he is unable to ignore his congenital pessimism: "Everything is going to become unimaginably worse and never get better again."[1]

Such a comment seems to be more the product of a moment of despair than a final appraisal of the future, for Vonnegut, like Faulkner, cannot "accept the end of man."[2] Man is the only thing sacred at the center of his work. In his first novel, Player Piano, the Ghost Shirt Society expresses the credo that man must be accepted for all his shortcomings because he is the sum total of these: "I hold that there must be virtue in imperfection, for Man is imperfect, and Man is a creation of God. That there must be virtue in frailty, for Man is frail, and Man is a creation of God." (etc.)[3]

[1] Time, p. 8.

[2] Alexis Gregory, ed., Nobel Prize Library (New York: Helvetica Press, Inc., 1971), p. 8.

[3] Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Player Piano (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), p. 262.

In a later book, Cat's Cradle (1963), the religion of Bokononism explains the exit of the Creator. The Book of Genesis tells of God's creation of life from mud to alleviate His "cosmic loneliness." Then man inquires: "'What is the purpose of all this?'... 'Everything must have a purpose?' asked God. 'Certainly,' said man. 'Then I leave it to you to think of one for all this,' said God. And He went away."[1] Thus, through the death of God, man becomes responsible not only for all the evil in the world, but also for finding a purpose in life. This is the mission of Malachi Constant, the protagonist of The Sirens of Titan.

The opening perspective of the book is ironic, set in the future where man has mastered the meaning of life in a time "of goodness and wisdom" (8). It prepares a backward look to the time in which man sought meaning in an outward direction, space. But there he was confounded. He found "the bounties of space, of infinite outwardness, were three: empty heroics, low comedy, and pointless death" (8). The story to be related is about these early times. Winston Niles Rumfoord, a pathetic God-like figure, calls upon Malachi Constant for the working out of the destiny of the earth. Rumfoord is God-like in his ability to exist in many places at one time (the chrono-synclastic-infundibulum which extends from the Sun

[1]Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Cat's Cradle (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1970), p. 177.

to Betelgeuse and where all truths fit together into one), his ability to foretell the future, and his inability to reproduce sexually. It is a terrible state in that the continuous materializations, one every fifty-nine days, ultimately sap him of his strength and bring about his final dematerialization into space.

Constant, the richest man in America, is, as denoted by his name, the "faithful messenger" (17) who is summoned by Rumfoord. He receives the prophecy that he is to travel to Mars, Mercury, back to Earth, and finally to Titan; and that he and Rumfoord's wife, Beatrice, are to mate and produce a son named Chrono. The prophet indicates the importance of this series of events as he begins to dematerialize: "for the Universe is just being born. It's the great becoming" (39). And Malachi is the agent of this generative mission. "Constant became the bottom-most point in a whirlpool of fate" (42).

It is a complex fate that involves Malachi and Beatrice being taken to Mars where he becomes a soldier and she becomes an instructor at the Schliemann Breathing School for Martian Recruits, an institute that prepares students to survive without oxygen through the use of oxygen-rich pills called goofballs. Though their memories are tampered with several times to make them forget that they are different from the rest of the programmed recruits, this fact continues to struggle to the surface. Rumfoord himself relates the pathetic tale of

their mating and the ensuing pangs of guilt and sorrow they each experience which culminate in Malachi's writing a philosophical journal and Beatrice's composing poetry. Their illicit union produces the prophesied Chrono whose good luck piece, a four-inch piece of metal with holes drilled in it is, as decreed, "unbelievably important" (39). Their attempted escape from Mars is unsuccessful, and they are among the small number that survives Mars' suicidal attack on Earth. It is a sanguinary debacle masterminded by Rumfoord who, in his near-divine wisdom, sees it as the only means of creating "a monolithic Brotherhood of Man" (175). Nearly the entire Martian contingent, ludicrous in its paltry arms and training, is destroyed by zealous earthlings. The shame the victors experience upon realizing their savage deeds is the crucial element for Winston's "Brotherhood." As he states in his Pocket History of Mars: "Any man who would change the world in a significant way must have showmanship, a genial willingness to shed other people's blood, and a plausible new religion to introduce during the brief period of repentance and horror that usually follows bloodshed" (174). Malachi Constant is the central figure of the religion, "The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent" (180).

But before he is to function in this role, he embarks on another adventure with yet another God-figure, Boaz, one of the Martian commanders. They are sent in a direction away from earth toward the planet Mercury. There they spend two

years, the length of time decreed by Rumfoord before the appearance on earth of Malachi, during which time Boaz becomes deeply involved with the planet's only inhabitants, beautiful, evanescent creatures called harmoniums. These shallow, limited beings have only the sense of touch and are capable of transmitting but two messages, each a response to the other: "Here I am.... So glad you are" (186). This new environment suits Boaz much better than it does Malachi. Whereas Constant views it "as being either malevolent or cruelly mismanaged," (200) Boaz attains a serene dignity previously unknown to him: "I found me a place where I can do good without doing any harm" (196). The transformation that occurs within the two is devastating. Malachi, the struggling idealist on Mars, regresses; Boaz, the brutal officer, flourishes: "Boaz, when he straightened up, was a wise, decent, brown Hercules. Unk, by comparison, felt scrawny, rootless, and soreheaded" (212).

It is no coincidence that Vonnegut has Boaz, the only Black in the story, emit the black humorist's response of uncontrollable laughter at the realization of the absurdity of his position on Mars: "The cabin was filled with a strange, rustling, coughing sound. It was laughter. It was Boaz's laughter. What made it so strange was that Boaz had never laughed in that particular way before--had never laughed before at the things he was laughing at now.... He was laughing at the dumb way he had let himself be used--by God knows who for

God knows what" (182 and 183). This emotional release frees him to fulfill his new God-like role for the harmoniums of Mercury--a preferential deity who favors those creatures he loves best, yet a benevolent one for all of them.

Thus he remains in this blissful union with his adoring harmoniums for the rest of his life while Malachi must travel on to achieve his fulfillment. Toward this goal he turns his space craft to earth and the churches who are awaiting the weary space wanderer. They have prospered during his two years on Mercury, sacrificing all to the goal of fairness and equality of man. Those who have been accidentally gifted by strength, beauty or intelligence proudly display handicaps that reduce their prowess to the great median. For, in the words of Reverend C. Horner Redwine, the pastor of the church where Malachi lands, "Mankind, rejoice in the apathy of our Creator, for it makes us free and truthful and dignified at last" (215). Man, who had been powerless to manipulate fortune under the precept of a concerned God, is now able to administer equality to all, to purge from existence the "random ways of luck" (227). The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent is no longer "like a wet mother dodo that had been at various times Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Unitarian, and Universal Apocalyptic," (216) it is now a going concern complete with emblems of the new faith, doll-like "Malachi's" of high-impact plastic.

Another important element of the liturgy is the sacred

inscription etched over the door of the church. The man who responds in these sacred words will be the eagerly awaited Space Wanderer. The question is put to Malachi by the frenzied congregation: "What happened to you?" (228). And Malachi responds verbatim the inscribed words: "I was a victim of a series of accidents,... as are we all" (229). The crowd responds with wild cheering and dancing as Constant, dazed by all this confusion upon his return to earth, responds true to Vonnegut's black humor: "He laughed. Oh boy. What the hell. He laughed" (230).

He is whisked to the Rumfoord estate in Newport where Niles awaits to consummate the new liturgy by the sacrifice of the scapegoat. Surrounding the estate are the survivors of the Martian fleet, displaced earthlings with wiped-out memories selling "Malachi's" to the zealots. They have fulfilled their part of the Rumfoord plan and are safe from further abuse. As Malachi's mate observes: "That's one consolation.... We're all used up. We'll never be of any use to him again" (242). The perplexed Malachi, unknowingly operating under the name of Unk since his kidnapping to Mars, led to expect some sort of reward at this pageant, suffers the knowledge that he is really the hated Malachi Constant, and that he has murdered his best friend Stony Stevenson on Mars.

He is sentenced to embark on a one-way mission to Titan in a rocketship, the scapegoat of the Church of God the

Utterly Indifferent, "a central symbol of wrong-headedness for a perfectly enormous religious sect.... /a/ dignified self-sacrifice /that the Church may/ remember and ponder for all time," (255) "the most memorable, magnificent, and meaningful human being of modern times" (256). Pausing on the threshold of the rocket, the epitome of dejection and self-abasement, he is to see one of the few goods that Vonnegut stresses throughout the book, the beauty of nature. "The sermon of the panorama was that even a man without a friend in the Universe could still find his home planet mysteriously, heartbreakingly beautiful" (260). And so he departs for Titan with Bee his mate and Chrono their son.

The only full-time inhabitant of Titan is Salo, an orange colored machine whose native planet is the far-distant Tralfamadore. The history of this ancient planet is a prophetic parallel to that of earth. It had begun hundreds of thousands of years earlier at which time it was inhabited by non-machine-like creatures with all the faults of humans: independability, inefficiency, unpredictability, and undurability. Plagued by the need to find purpose in existence, they create complex machines to serve tasks lower than this quest. The machines reach such a state of complexity and expertise that they are able to report that there is no such purpose in existence. The creatures cannot accept such a verdict and with the help of the machines annihilate themselves.

Salo, one of these machines, is stranded on Titan en route in his intergalactic mission of carrying a secret message from one end of the universe to the other. He patiently awaits the arrival of a needed replacement part for his spacecraft which happens to be Chrono's good luck piece. Tralfamadore has been controlling earth for centuries in order to have this replacement part brought so that the message may be delivered. Salo bides his time on Titan awaiting delivery of the part. He functions in a God-like role in his observance of life on earth. Through the viewer on the instrument panel of the ship he observes the human drama which unfolds in a self-conscious manner "as though there were a big eye in the sky" (276). The ironic point is that such a big eye does exist, but it is not that of a heavenly father, but rather, that of a three-eyed, three-legged, armless orange machine who whiles his time away making statutes of the most interesting earthlings and selectively breeding Titanic daisies.

His relationship with Rumfoord leads him to a new experience, that of love. Rumfoord, however, perceives that he has been used by the Tralfamadorians and spitefully turns on Salo. He asks Salo to open the sealed message, and Salo, infected by all the weaknesses of humanity, overturns his mechanical nature and complies with the wish. Only it is too late. Winston Niles Rumfoord vanishes forever into space before he can learn from the message the reason for his terrible fate. It is a single dot that is Tralfamadorian for

"Greetings" (301). Salo, having failed as a messenger and a machine, suicidally dismantles himself leaving the recently arrived family of Malachi, Beatrice and Chrono alone on Titan.

They separate, each pursuing a different mode of existence. Chrono joins the Titanic bluebirds and leads a pagan life with those creatures, the most beautiful things on Titan. Bea becomes a recluse at the Rumfoord palace devoting her entire energy to writing a rebuttal of Winston's theory on the purpose of earth. She dies contentedly upon completing her work, an apology for her own existence and that of mankind: "The worst thing that could possibly happen to anybody ... would be to not to be used for anything by anybody" (310).

Malachi is transported back to earth by Salo whom he has reconstructed and who has decided to continue on his absurd mission to uphold the honor of fools. The Space Wanderer is hypnotized by the Tralfamadorian and believes he is reunited with his friend Stony Stevenson, alive, not killed by Unk. Before descending to his mysteriously beautiful home planet where he is to die in hypnotic solemnity, he, too, attains an intimation of the purpose of existence only in his seventy-third year: "It took us that long to realize that a purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved" (313).

The book ends on the ironic line of its beginning: "Somebody up there likes you" (319). But the reader has been shown that there is no one "up there" to like anyone. There

is only Vonnegut, and he loves you because you are a fellow earthling complete with your human frailities and absurdities. In a funny book he has drawn an unfunny picture--not funny and yet, at the same time, not sad. For it is a story of humanity under duress which prevails against stiff odds. A loving God has been taken away and in His place there are limited God-like figures: Boaz, the preferential sustainer of the harmoniums; Salo, the emotion-ridden machine from Tralfamadore; and Winston Niles Rumfoord, the pain-ridden manipulator of the human race. All of them are able to perform good acts, yet they are all strictly human acts. They are the best and only hope in the absence of an almighty God. And they are all similar in their basis which is love and concern. This is Vonnegut's response to the problem of modern life. As he states in his preface to a collection of his short stories: "And I realize now that the two main themes of my novels were stated by my siblings: 'Here I am cleaning shit off of practically everything' and 'No pain.'"[1]

The best response to this imperfect world is to accentuate that which is beautiful and minimize that which is painful. The Sirens of Titan is a highly successful rendition of this theme. It is an unusual book from its inception, an improvisational response to an inquisitive editor who had

[1]Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Welcome to the Monkey House (New York: Delacorte Press, 1968), p. xiv.

asked the author why he hadn't written another book. Vonnegut bluffed by saying he had an idea for one, and, upon further questioning, he began to tell the story of Malachi Constant. As the author states his feeling for the book: "Every mother's favorite child is the one that's delivered by natural childbirth. Sirens of Titan was that kind of book."[1]

The general reaction to the book has been inconsistent. However, a critic of no less renown than Leslie A. Fiedler heaps high praise on the work:

> The Sirens of Titan, /is/ his best book, I think--most totally achieved, most nearly dreamed rather than contrived. In it he evokes all the themes, along with their sustaining images, for which we remember him with special affection and amusement. ... It is, moreover, his most chatzpahdik, his most outrageously attractive and arrogant book; for in it he dares not only to ask the ultimate question about the meaning of human life, but to answer it.[2]

And the important thing is that it is a serious answer even though it appears in the guise of black humor and science fiction. The seriousness of the black humor writer has already been suggested. His purposes, according to Scholes, are these: to keep humanity in shape; to keep our conscience free, vigorous and growing; and to penetrate the moral

[1]Richard Todd, "The Masks of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.," The New York Times Magazine (January 24, 1971), p. 22.

[2]Leslie A. Fiedler, "The Divine Stupidity of Kurt Vonnegut," Esquire (September, 1970), p. 202.

pollution of today's society.[1]

Vonnegut's own words about himself, however, are the most revealing of all. His article on Herman Hesse contrasts himself with the earlier writer who, like Vonnegut, is highly regarded by today's youthful readers. "Hesse is no black humorist. Black humorists' holy wanderers find nothing but junk and lies and idiocy wherever they go."[2]

But he also finds similarities between Hesse and himself, especially in the realm of homesickness which is so central to Hesse's Steppenwolf. Vonnegut reveals this about himself: "I do not mock homesickness as a silly affliction that is soon outgrown. I never outgrew it and neither did my father and neither did Hesse. I miss my Mommy and Daddy, and I always will--because they were so nice to me. Now and then, I would like to be a child again."[3] And this is Vonnegut's final optimistic message; given the state of a universe composed of absurdity, after an individual has loved another and experienced the beauty of nature he has not lived in vain.

Thus Vonnegut poses an entirely different response from O'Connor with her solid faith in God. As he says: "Earthlings who have felt that the Creator clearly wanted

[1]Scholes, p. 11.

[2]Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., "Why They Read Hesse," Horizon, Vol. XII, No. 2 (Spring, 1970), p. 29.

[3]Vonnegut, Horizon, p. 30.

this or that have almost always been pig-headed and cruel."[1] And he also differs from Styron's blank despair. They view the universe in similar terms, but their reaction to it is the major concern. Styron could never laughingly create Malachi Constant; Vonnegut could never mournfully create Milton Loftis. Vonnegut's "otherworldly laughter"[2] is what enables him to endure life in this world as he faces the problems of mankind head on. "He articulates the blackest suspicions of a skeptical age without entering hate or partisanship of evil."[3]

It is significant that the vehicle Vonnegut chooses to transmit his story is science fiction, a genre that has gained academic respect in recent years. For the best science fiction does not dwell on pure fantasy but employs elements of fantasy to deal with real human problems in a technological age, becoming, in its ability to allow both subjective and objective levels, Eliot's objective correlative, enabling man to face and understand problems he cannot face directly. In the words of a recent Modern Language Association Conference,

[1]Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., "Excelsior! We're Going to the Moon! Excelsior," The New York Times Magazine (July 13, 1969), p. 11.

[2]Benjamin De Mott, "Vonnegut's Otherworldly Laughter," Saturday Review (May 1, 1971), p. 31.

[3]De Mott, p. 38.

science fiction has become "the modern mythology."[1] In Vonnegut's work, time and eternity, as well as fiction and science fiction, fuse in his parable of man in which despair becomes hope; for the cyclical patterns of birth, rebirth and eternity, especially as evidenced in the story of Tralfamadore, find their simplest expression in the oft repeated words of the author, "So it goes."[2]

[1]Willis E. McNelly, "Science Fiction--The Modern Mythology," America, Vol. 123, No. 5 (September 5, 1970), p. 125.

[2]McNelly, p. 127.

## Chapter 5

"We must dare to hope against despair because we are men"

The power of love is also what turns despair into hope for Richard Kim in his first novel The Martyred. Set against the backdrop of the Korean War it is highly autobiographical in nature. Interestingly, Kim's youth bears striking similarities to the boyhood of Hazel Motes. He was strongly influenced by the intensity of his grandfather, a Presbyterian minister who was killed by the Communists at the beginning of the war, and his father who was tortured into "conversion" to Communism by his captors. His novel comes from his sense of commitment to their spirit but develops into something closer to his own spirit. As Kim says: "Originally ... I had wanted to write about my grandfather's fate. I don't think I was as outraged by his execution as I was frustrated. I tried to get inside his mind at the last moment of his life in the midst of destruction and murders. So I began to write--and then the novel took its own shape and course. I seemed to have tried to define myself in it."[1]

The complexity of this undertaking is perhaps greater for Kim than most writers, for he lacks a single definable

[1]Mary Kersey Harvey, "The Author," Saturday Review, Vol. 47, No. 8 (February 27, 1964),p. 58.

identity. Born in Korea, he presently resides in the United States. He is aware of the difficulty inherent in his situation: "I have never really developed an immutable national identity from a political, social, and cultural point of view. I happen to think that national and racial consciousness creates injustice and exploitation of men by men. There is too much petty self-righteousness in the world."[1]

His concern for man is dominant in this novel--especially for suffering man. His more recent book, Lost Names: Scenes From a Korean Boyhood, suggests the importance of his mother's role in the shaping of his conscience. As a schoolboy in a play, after being beaten by his teacher, he leaves the stage in tears: "Why was I weeping? For me?--for my people down there?--for my friends? Or--for everyone, Koreans and Japanese alike? For the conquerors and the conquered alike? Why the tears? I do not know.' 'Perhaps for wounded souls,' says my mother. 'Everywhere.'"[2] His concern for wounded souls could not find a much better setting than in war-torn Korea of the late forties and early fifties. And he poignantly describes not only the intense physical suffering but also the more profound spiritual anguish of victims of war who are both "the conquerors and the conquered."

[1]Harvey, p. 58.

[2]Richard E. Kim, Lost Names: Scenes From a Korean Boyhood (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), p. 142.

Critical response to the book has been mixed. It is hailed on one hand as "a modern Christian epic."[1] And it is condemned on the other as a shallow piece that caters to the reader's sympathy for Kim's personal background.[2] It seems to this writer that the work lies somewhere between these two positions: considerably more than self-conscious wallowing in personal grief, somewhat less than greatness. What greatness it does approximate is due less to its style and language and more to its conflict and theme. It addresses itself directly to the problem of existence in modern life where meaningless war has become the rule and the ability to know and understand truth has become the exception; where faith has become difficult to hold and sainthood is "most often ... achieved by man racked by doubt."[3] Kim dedicates his book thusly: "To the memory of Albert Camus whose insight into 'a strange form of love' overcame for me the nihilism of the trenches and bunkers of Korea."[4] The author's affinity with the existentialist is obvious, for his protagonist is truly a

[1]"Best-Selling Korean," Life, Vol. 56, No. 12 (March 20, 1964), pp. 125-26.

[2]Ivan Gold, "The Big Puff," The Nation, Vol. 198, No. 19 (May 4, 1964), p. 462.

[3]Gold, p. 462.

[4]Richard E. Kim, The Martyred (New York: George Brazziller, Inc., Pocket Cardinal Edition, 1965), dedication page. Further quotations from this work are from this edition and appear with the page number in parentheses.

"stranger" in search of humanity.

Mr. Lee is transformed by war from his teaching position at the university to Captain Lee, an officer in the Political Intelligence section of the Korean Army. He is alone and lonely: "I had no acquaintances in the city, and sometimes I felt vaguely envious of these officers" /who did/ (3). His chief assignment is to investigate the execution of Christian ministers by the Communists. Fourteen had been abducted but only twelve were killed. He meets the two who were spared and attempts to elicit the details of the ordeal from them. One of them, Mr. Hann, has lost his sanity through the experience. The other, Mr. Shin, holds the key to the mystery. Lee entwines his fate with that of the minister when he poses a question at their first meeting: "Your God--is he aware of the suffering of his people?" (20). The clergyman has no response, and this question is to trouble Shin the remainder of his days, for he lacks true Christian faith. However, he abounds in Christian sacrifice.

The army seeks to use the execution of the ministers for propaganda purposes; Shin seeks to use it for the religious purpose of sustaining his fellow Christians. The truth of the incident evolves slowly. It is that the twelve "martyrs" are less than their reputation implies. Faced with torture and death they denounce their god and die impiously. Even the strongest of the twelve, Park, father of Lee's best friend, rejects God at the last moment. Hann is spared by

virtue of his insanity; Shin is spared by his courageous defiance of his tormenters. He is the only one of the fourteen who has acted heroically and this spirit has so impressed his enemies that they have delivered him from death.

Shin hides this truth from his flock choosing to martyr himself in their eyes as the traitor who has betrayed the twelve. He preaches this lie to various congregations to set up the twelve "martyred" as a symbol of hope and eventual triumph over persecution. However, this lie overlies another which is even more profound. Shin himself does not believe in God. He is a humanist who sees the function of religion as that of telling the necessary lie to sustain life and combat despair. In this sense he is a foil to Lee who, in his insistence on the truth, feels isolated from mankind and comes to an affinity with his fellow man only when he too learns to compromise the awful truth.

The other three main characters converge on the question of truth from different vantage points and all come away from it greatly changed. Park has been alienated as a youth by virtue of his father's fanaticism. He can see no value in such self-righteousness for he himself has been swamped with doubt. The news of his father's final fallibility forces him to reaccess his own position. In a sense he, too, has achieved a bond with his father if only at this last moment. He agrees to aid the masquerade by representing the families of the twelve martyrs at a memorial service. He goes further by

sacrificing his integrity in pretending he is the prodigal son returning to the fold of his father's god, converted back to Christianity by the Martyr's sacrifice. His explanation for this deception is quite simple, yet profound in its simplicity. His reply to his astonished friend Lee's query of why he can act contradictorily to his true beliefs is: "For the poor suffering, tortured people, can't you see? (154). Captain Lee cannot see at this point. Indeed, Park is much more perceptive than his friend. He lashes out at him revealing the absurdity of his abstract view: "Ah, your kind of understanding is not enough.... You view their suffering and their despair in a detached, intellectual way precisely because you are merely a sympathetic observer.' His passionate words struck me [Lee] with relentless force, piercing deep into my heart. 'I love them,' he said quietly" (110-11).

Colonel Chang, the atheistic commander, views the question of religion and truth with a cynic's eye. He has no belief himself and he cares not what others believe. He is a professional military man whose business it is to manufacture and modify "truth" to best suit the needs of the army. But his involvement with the conflict shakes him from this abstract level. In the beginning he had blamed the ills of the people on their silly beliefs in god. But through his experience with the ministers he is moved to help find ways of minimizing these ills. He castigates Lee for his blind

insistence on telling the truth, allowing the possibility of its existence but suggesting that it may serve its purpose better if left buried. His experiences in the battered city of Pyongyang, especially with the enigma of Mr. Shin, have pierced the armor of his detachment and caused him real concern for the war victims. Giving his final advice to Lee who is replacing him as commander in the city he says: "... heaven help you if you go around making those miserable people more miserable" (122). But still Lee is not moved to compassion. He replies in his absolutist manner: "I will hang onto my truth and will not compromise it" (123).

Chaplain Koh also undergoes a modification of his position. His basic goal, like Shin's, is to bolster man through Christianity. However, for him there is no conflict. He feels what is right and true in the Christian sense must necessarily be best for man. He spells this out in his position on presenting the true rendition of the martyrs' deaths: "Martyrs serve the will of God, not the ephemeral needs of men" (123). But, under the influence of Mr. Shin, he achieves a new respect for the needs of men. In the end it is he who maintains the camp for the refugees. His human compassion has brought him a long way from his earlier implicit resignation to the obedience of God's will. For at that time he had said: "Truth cannot be hidden away. Perhaps, it was God's will that such a painful truth as this should have come to Christians" (105-6). His relationship with Shin has shown him that there

is greater value in withholding the painful truth, for there is enough pain in the lives of his countrymen.

The evolution of these three men is significant to Kim's depiction of the pervasiveness of the need to compromise absolutes for the benefit of man. And it also shows the interrelatedness of this coming to knowledge. The central figure who is the driving force of this theme is, of course, Mr. Shin, the true "martyr" of the novel. He is an enigmatic figure whose personal belief runs counter to his outward professions. For, although a Christian minister, he does not believe in god or life everlasting. Therefore, the great bulk of his life is devoted to contradicting his own beliefs to others.

Only twice has he let his truth out and both times the consequences have been disastrous. The first time is when he tells his wife, who is grieving over the loss of their son, that there is no after life where they will be united. She cannot abide such a terrible truth devoid of hope and condolence. The burden it places on her mind is too great and she dies shortly thereafter in a state of despair. The second time is when Shin reveals his truth to Mr. Hann. The young minister is near spiritual ruination from witnessing the denial of Park who had been his inspiration. Again the result of Shin's truthful revelation is a despair that racks the mind irreparably. Mr. Hann dies shortly after this profession articulating his rejection of god.

In these instances Shin has seen how men cannot survive

in possession of his "truth" and, therefore, how lying is a necessity for the endurance of mankind. As he explains to Lee: "I saw how men can come to be like savages without the promise, yes, the illusion of the eternal hope, without the promise of justice, if not here and now--and there is none--then somewhere else, in heaven, yes in the Kingdom of God' ... When Lee asks, 'And your hope? Your promise?' Shin replies: 'That many will have lived without having been enslaved by despair, that many will have endured their worldly sufferings with a sense of purpose, that many will have died in peace, in faith, and with a blissful vision'" (197-98).

Shin's position, then, is that of one who, for the sake of man rather than god, needs to bear the burden of veiling the truth. Such an absurdity, which Kim apparently feels to be a basic part of the human condition, is close to the spirit of Camus. For in The Martyred the masses are able to live free from despair and comforted by the promise of justice and salvation while the few must bear the terrible burden, the almost holy burden which is that "strange form of love."[1]

Shin accepts this burden through his decision to erroneously report the details of the detention and execution of the ministers. He decides against the truth immediately

[1]William S. Lynch, "A Strange Form of Love," Saturday Review, Vol. 47, No. 8 (February 22, 1964), p. 58.

basing his decision on the effects it would have on those who hear it. He concludes that they would be devastating. Christians could not bear the realization that their ministers died as blasphemous cowards. As he explains to Lee: "My young friend, has it ever occurred to you that they may not want the truth?"(69). It may well not have occurred to Lee for to him truth is essential regardless of people's desires. He and Shin are far apart at this point. For Lee "truth" is "right." For Shin "right" is that which will be the most beneficial for the greatest number of people.

In this manner he distorts the abstract truth of the execution and chooses instead to tell a lie, that he has no knowledge of the events of the execution. However, when he finds that his silence serves no positive purpose for his suffering people, he creates a greater lie; he accuses himself of guilt. Although this outrages the Christians at first, he cleverly manipulates them through his preaching. He says the twelve died gloriously and that only he had been weak and renounced his faith. He challenges them with the spirit of the twelve who forgave him and prayed for him. He makes himself into a Judas who, no matter how great his sin, is forgiven by the loving spirit of Christ. As he has been forgiven of his sins, he implores his congregation to resolve themselves of sin and also be forgiving.

This lie works a profound effect on the Christians. Whereas in his silence they had violently condemned him, in

his admission of guilt that has been forgiven they venerate him as a symbol of the power of salvation. As Lynch points out in his article, there can be no Golgotha without a Judas; no redemption without sin.[1] Shin perpetuates this lie until the army is forced to withdraw from Pyongyang and then mysteriously disappears. Later, numerous reports crop up of his appearance throughout Korea preaching his same gospel of sin and forgiveness, sustaining the spirits of his war-ridden countrymen.

Although the effect of his ministry is profound for his fellow Christians, it is immeasurable in the life of the protagonist. Captain Lee is an atheist whose penchant is truth at all costs. He views the world as a tragic place, but he is not willing to compromise absolute truth to alleviate any of the sorrow. As Shin observes: "You must have been deeply hurt by the terrible injustice and despair that break the hearts of people" (56). Even so, Lee professes his creed, "Truth cannot be bribed" (56).

His insistence on truth is so great that he values it more than solace of the suffering humanity he views daily, even more than life itself. For although he has killed for his country, he will not tamper with truth for it. He insists that no good can come from the lies that are intended to help the people. "I am tired. I am sick of all this pretension,

[1]Lynch, p. 58.

all these noble lies, all in the name of the people, for the people. And meanwhile the people continue to suffer, continue to die, deceived from birth to death" (152). However, the example of Shin's sacrifice has bothered him. Perhaps suffering can be alleviated only outside of the truth. Perhaps Park's recollection of a statement describing the state of life is true: "Deeper truth lies in the fact that the world is not meaningless and absurd but is in a meaningless state" (164). The Christians have their belief which sustains them in this "meaningless state;" Lee has no such sustenance in his truth. His estrangement from his fellow man continues to bother him: "Alone, I stood there for awhile, looking down at the sorrowful city, listening vaguely to the hymns of praise sung within by those who had their god" (161).

The complexity of his own sense of isolation, the suffering of the people, and Mr. Shin's influence engender a gradual change within him. For the first time he is deeply dissatisfied with the effect of his truthfulness. When Shin comes to him for support and understanding, the rigid captain confronts him by disclaiming any satisfaction he has derived from the minister's sermons. As Shin sadly leaves Lee thinks: "I knew I had hurt him, and I hated myself for it" (166). This is a pivotal statement in the protagonist's development for it is the first time he admits to himself any sense of guilt in his rigid stance.

Shortly thereafter, as his detachment leaves the city,

he watches the proceedings from his window, hearing only the sound of a clanging church bell. He reaches the nadir of his despair from which he is to begin to rise: "I felt depressed beyond all hope" (180). He is mistaken in feeling beyond hope for that sustaining force is provided him by Shin who divulges his terrible secret of disbelief and the purpose of his ministry for human ends only.

Shin's awareness of the nonexistence of god, like Lee's, is his cross to bear for the masses who believe. He provides Lee with intimations of the good of his sacrifice and brings "the stranger" into the bond of suffering humanity. The effect upon Lee is devastating: "And for the first time since the war, I abandoned myself to uncontrollable tears, my tears, my contrition--for my parents, for my countrymen, and for those many unknown souls I had destroyed. 'Courage,' he /Shin/ said gently, laying his hands on my shoulders. 'Courage, Captain. We must hope against hopelessness. We must dare to hope against despair because we are men'" (186).

Lee becomes a disciple of Shin and begins his transformation by serving the human needs of his spiritual master. When the ailing minister inquires about the state of the war the Captain abandons his precious truth for the first time and reports that there have been no casualties. He even agrees to try to pray to the Christian god for Shin if something should happen to him. Shin sees that Lee is the one to continue to provide hope for the people and this hope sustains

the old man in his illness. He places the mantle of his terrible burden on the shoulders of the young Captain in a message: "He said have courage so you can give him courage" (202). And later, when the two men talk together in the church, the mandate is formally delivered: "He whispered, 'Love man, Captain! Help him! Bear your cross with courage, courage to fight despair, to love man, to have pity on mortal man'" (206).

The novel ends dramatically with Captain Lee accepting his burden and thereby his fraternity with man: "I walked away from the church past the rows of tents where silent suffering gnawed at the hearts of people--my people--and headed toward the beach, which faced the open sea. There a group of refugees, gathered under the starry dome of the night sky, were humming in unison a song of homage to their homeland. And with a wondrous lightness of heart hitherto unknown to me, I joined them" (228). The verb "joined" used here works on two different levels, for his singing is representative of his communion with his fellow man. The headnote of the novel places Lee in the humanistic tradition of Empedocles for both are inextricably bound to their human condition.[1]

[1] "And openly I pledged my heart to the grave and suffering land, and often in the consecrated night, I promised to love her faithfully until death, unafraid, with her heavy burden of fatality, and never to despise a single one of her enigmas. Thus did I join myself to her with a mortal cord." Holderlin, The Death of Empedocles.

Kim's choice is an apt one for his treatment of the age-old theme. Kim has created in Lee a protagonist who has been able to traverse the chasm from abstract, idealistic youth to pragmatic moral maturity. It is significant that this growth has necessitated the replacement of absolute truth by the necessary lie, the chief criterion being that which affirms humanity with all the ramifications of lessening of sorrow, avoidance of despair, and affirmation of hope.

The novel stands on its own merits as a unified work of art. However, it is enhanced by some knowledge of the troubled country which is its setting. Writing of his native land after revisiting it Kim says of the plight of the people: "When illusions, delusions, and smug contentions are swept away, what is left is a sombre reality that the majority of Korean people are poor, miserable, suffering people, oppressed for centuries by governments and politicians deceived by sweet-tongued political swindlers and jugglers, threatened by nature, terrorized by power-hungry fellow countrymen, battered by the Communists, exploited by the pseudo-democrats, and wavering on the brink of despair."[1] His novel is steeped in his own anguished spirit for his native land.

Throughout the lengthy article, Kim struggles with the problems of Korea, many of which the people seem to bring

[1]Richard E. Kim, "O My Korea!" The Atlantic Monthly, Vol. 217, No. 2 (February, 1966), p. 116.

upon themselves, and he is frustrated by his ignorant countrymen. In fact, he tries to set himself apart from them, for he is an American resident. However, the bond of birth and blood is too strong and his sympathies clearly lie with the Korean natives. And his article, full of cynicism, pessimism and despair, ends on an upward thrust of ultimate hope. For the drought, which is the backdrop for his mission in Korea, gives way in the end to the flooding rain which leaves that sad country beautiful again. "Then the rain stopped and once again the country was shimmering under the wondrously serene, clear blue sky."[1]

Kim's fiction is inseparable from his nonfiction and both are simple and poetic. Writing out of his own confused anguish in an attempt to define himself, he has articulated a strong case for one response to the problem of modern existence, and that is this: He who is plagued by intellectual awareness of the non-existence of god best joins himself to mankind by veiling this knowledge and sustaining those who lack the awareness. In a world where the truth has terrible consequences, the best thing that can be done is to compromise this truth to serve positive ends for man. Or, given the lack of divinity, man most nearly achieves this state by affirming humanity. For Richard Kim this is the sacred ministry of life.

[1]Kim, The Atlantic Monthly, p. 117.

# Chapter 6

## Conclusion

The novels examined here address themselves to a multiplicity of themes that are central to the dilemma of mid-twentieth century existence. There is the meaninglessness of war. Hazel Motes has abandoned the God of his upbringing while serving his country in the army. Milton Loftis's grandfather's erroneous advice comes from the destructive milieu produced by the Civil War. People are manipulated as murderers and victims in Rumfoord's interplanetary conflict. And human life is cheaply regarded by those making military decisions in Kim's Korea. Indeed, the problem of war is crucial to the consideration of divinity for its widespread destructiveness is difficult to reconcile with the concept of God's benevolence. It is noteworthy that O'Connor deals with it only in a secondary way, for Hazel is on his way back from the war as Wise Blood begins. It is more troublesome to the other three novelists because of a second common theme, the question of the existence of God.

For O'Connor there is no question. He exists intrinsically so that it becomes just a matter of her protagonist discovering and accepting this fact. There is no such simple answer for the other three writers. For them God exists in a relative way. That is to say, he exists for those who believe

he exists. According to Styron and Kim, these are notably unenlightened and unsophisticated people: the mentally deficient Maudie and the Negroes in Lie Down in Darkness; the embattled masses in The Martyred. In The Sirens of Titan God's profound indifference does nothing to enhance his existence. Therefore, the burden of assertive action falls on man who creates a god more in line with man's basic desires of brotherhood and equality.

This is a third theme of the four works: human relationships. Man strives to raise himself from isolated loneliness to communion with his fellow man. Hazel Motes never does develop any strong personal relationships. Since he is able to attain communion with his savior he does not need the solace of his fellow human beings. But the major characters of the other three novels, being unable to attain otherworldly sustenance, desperately require strong human relationships to bolster their lives. The central theme of Styron's novel deals with the total inability of a man, his wife and daughter to accomplish this. Their personal failures leave them in a state of despair for, given the void of religious belief, without each other there is nothing. Vonnegut brings his protagonist to a slow, painful awareness of the need to love whoever is around since that is all there is. And Kim combines both personal and societal levels of human relationships. Lee is a stranger to man and mankind. His affinity for Mr. Shin leads him to a greater union with his fellow man.

Such relationships depend upon some form of the element of love which is a fourth theme of the novels. Again, in O'Connor's piece, love is shown basically as a property of the God-man relationship. Love attempted on a purely human basis comes off cheaply and grotesquely as in the sexual encounters Hazel experiences. Love is the crucial missing element in the Loftis household and in modern society. The Negroes have it, but modern man has lost it in his sophistication. Man struggles to hold onto it in Vonnegut's work. His characters find it is not easy to love whoever is around, but that there is no other choice. And love is the humanizing factor in The Martyred. Only such a powerful emotion is able to pull down abstract absolutism and replace it with genuine human concern. Lee learns to love the "truth" less and his fellow man more.

A fifth theme revolves around the question of truth. O'Connor presents it as absolute and singular; God exists and man is a sinner who can be saved only by accepting and acting in accordance to this truth. The characters in Styron's book grope for the truth throughout their lives but never come to grips with it. That truth is that their lives can become meaningful only through a genuine concern for each other's humanity which is the basis of love. Truth is almost synonymous with absurdity in The Sirens of Titan. This is especially brought out in the chrono-synclastic-infindibulum in which all truths merge as one. But Rumfoord who is the

resident of this auspicious place seems no more able to define or explain truth than anyone else. Indeed, the most profound truth comes from the badly manipulated Constant who speaks the "truths" of beauty and love. Kim presents truth as a central stumbling block to his protagonist, one that must be re-examined in light of its relative merits and deficiencies. Only after much mental and spiritual anguish is Captain Lee able to perceive that it is indeed an impediment to mankind and therefore also to himself.

And a sixth theme is the question of martyrdom or personal sacrifice. Once again O'Connor's portrayal of salvation is so individualistic that Hazel serves primarily as a martyr for himself. That is, he sacrifices the goals of his original quest of godlessness to his ultimate salvation. However, he also provides assistance to another, although incidentally, in the effect he has on Mrs. Flood. So he becomes a martyr with a double purpose; his own salvation and that of another. Peyton Loftis becomes a martyr to no purpose. Just as her life has had no purpose other than to emphasize the absurdity of her family's lives, neither does her death. It does not reunite her parents nor does it bring them to God. It merely serves as the culmination of wasted life. It does have a purpose extrinsic to the world of the novel, however, in its message to the reader, a sort of "caveat" of what can happen if man allows himself to disintegrate. The martyrdom in <u>The Sirens of Titan</u> is more direct. In fact, in the hands

of Rumfoord, it is quite purposely directed and programmed for preconceived ends. Malachi is the epitome of the sacrificial victim who suffers to provide hope for mankind. And of course the question of personal sacrifice is crucial in The Martyred. Ironically it is not those who suffer death on religious grounds but rather those who continue to live who are called upon to make a greater sacrifice, the distortion of their own deeply personal feelings to others, for others. These martyrs bear the burden of perpetrating the necessary lie for mankind.

It can be seen through the tracing of these basic themes that Wise Blood stands apart from the other three works. In it O'Connor assumes the existence of God a priori and leads her chief character through a progression from early belief through denial and finally to total acceptance. Thus, her answers to the questions posed in the introduction of this thesis are that God does exist and that His nature is an all-compelling one, forcing man to become aware of Him and accept Him. The evil that exists comes from those who have not yet been saved. They are the bestial (Enoch), the immoral (Sabbath and Leora), and the cowardly (Asa Hawkes). These types abound in O'Connor's society, but a sign of optimism lies in Mrs. Flood's inclination to pursue Hazel's terrifying knowledge. The purpose of existence for O'Connor, then, is to know and accept God in a totality of body, mind and spirit. She sees this as neither an easy nor a genial task but one

that requires tremendous sacrifice. But sacrifice is implicit in all four novels. What distinguishes this one is that the reader is asked to accept that it is a true sacrifice for a real absolute. This affirmation of an intrinsic absolute is the chief difference between O'Connor and the other three novelists.

The society of Wise Blood is basically a homogeneous one. All of the central characters exist in a semi-transient manner and exhibit unsophisticated lifestyles. Lie Down in Darkness presents two very unlike societies with dissimilar values and beliefs. On the one hand there is the society of the Negroes, many of whom are domestic servants. Their answers to the questions cited would be that God does exist and man is nothing without Him. But man must suffer great iniquities on this earth to cleanse himself of his impurities so that he may see God in the after life. Evil comes from those who have rejected God, but the prayers of the believers have the power to help the unbelievers attain salvation too. This much of Styron's position is not far from O'Connor's. But his central message comes through the higher social stratum of modern intellectual man who has outgrown this simplistic solution long ago. His painful awareness engenders within him despair which may well prevent him from achieving a humanly satisfying life. Evil comes from man's folly and despair, but it could be combated if man would learn how to love.

The society of The Sirens of Titan is wealthy,

technological, and aware. Man's position in this universe is inanely insignificant. The earth exists as one small part of an intricate system designed to convey a message from one end of a machine-ruled solar system to the other. No traditional Judeo-Christian God exists and inequality abounds among men. One man's tampering with this society produces a more just existence for all at a great cost for several. But even these who are sacrificed can see the natural beauty of life and can know the basic purpose of their existence which is, once again, to love man. Therefore, individuals achieve their own meaning on the human level through human means. And sounding throughout all of this is the need for the ability to laugh, for only through love and laughter is man able to endure his absurd existence.

Kim's society, somewhat like Styron's, is divided between those who are painfully aware and those who are unaware. God exists for the unaware and their purpose is to keep faith in Him through the troubled times of their war-torn land so that they may be united with Him at death. They do not understand the cause of the evil that is a daily reality to them, but they are confident that their God will make things right in the end. The enlightened are in the minority and their purpose is a difficult one for it forces them to compromise their awareness. They see this as the only way of keeping humanity together and free from despair. But this involvement in the humanizing process also keeps them from despair for

they are able to find no comfort in the harsh realities of their intellectual truth. Their lives, then, are imbued with meaning in that they are the necessary agents for bringing meaning into the lives of others. One absolute, God, is gone. Another, truth, produces no positive results. What is left to them is the pursuit of the relative value of sustaining man at the cost of perpetrating a lie. This task they accept for, aware or unaware, they too are men.

Taken together the four novels depict four approaches to one central problem. With the exception of O'Connor, their similarities are greater than their differences. Their chief concern is always man and they rejoice in his successes and anguish in his failures. In this sense their message is that of optimism in the face of a despair that seems to be threatening from all directions; from within and without, even from beyond our planet. The basic tenet of O'Connor's novel which differentiates it from the others is her insistence on a supernatural agent to aid in this struggle. But the main point to be made is that all four of the writers admit the difficulty of the struggle and accept it as a challenge. Though circumstances bring them close to despair, the glimmer of hope is never lost. This is the final thrust of this thesis. Given the horrendous conditions of the modern world, man maintains the ability to posit value sufficient for a meaningful existence. The four writers dealt with here, as representative of the much larger group of serious contemporary writers whose

works concern themselves with the same issues, hold out to the reading public that precious quality of hope. Thus they function on both an artistic and human level. Their message of hope augments their art, and their art is made alive by this same life-giving message.

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